

How Smart People Work

March 2006

Create Connections

by Mark Goulston

Communication is key to getting the results you want. Do you connect with people or do you push them away?

John Baldoni specializes in connections. As a leadership and communications consultant, Baldoni works with senior managers to help them connect with their people in ways that are simple, honest, and genuine. Sounds easy, right? Not exactly. Baldoni believes that many executives focus so much on goals and objectives that they lose a sense of themselves--and the ability to convey that identity to employees. "One of the key attributes of leadership is authenticity," says Baldoni. "People want to follow leaders who seem genuine."

What Baldoni refers to is a concept that I call "experience far/experience near." When you speak "corporate," that is, language that reflects strategies and metrics, you separate yourself from people. Think Bill Gates. As CEO of Microsoft, he communicates in terms that are "experience far." When you speak conversationally, that is, language that is focused on individuals, you connect with people. Think Bill Clinton. As a former president, he communicates in terms that are "experience near." Obviously there is a time and place for both. Product launches and state-of-the-industry speeches may require language that centers on business objectives and tactics. Conversations with employees are opportunities for connection.

Communication Is Critical

Open communication is the key. "Leaders must demonstrate who they are as individuals and what they can do for the people and the organization they lead," says Baldoni, author of *How Great Leaders Get Great Results* (McGraw-Hill, 2006). Therefore, Baldoni urges leaders he works with to use their language to create genuine connections.

In his book, Baldoni shows how leaders use their communications to spread their vision, create alignment, push for results, instill discipline, and enable risk. Anne Mulcahy of Xerox, Meg Whitman of eBay, and Carlos Ghosn of Nissan are profiled in detail. Baldoni shows how these leaders, as well as many more, used their communications to connect with their people in ways that enabled them to achieve intended results. "Communication is vital to results because it is the process by which the leader connects with his constituency," says Baldoni. "It is up to the leader to tell people where they are going and why they are going there. The leader must also listen to the organization and ensure that they understand what is expected and how the leader can support them in this effort."

That kind of alignment is essential. "Organizations that succeed are those that pull together," Baldoni says. "Alignment is the process by which people pull together toward common purpose, i.e., to get things done." But, as Baldoni points out, organizations are not collections of automatons, and leaders must bear that in mind as they try to push ahead with their plans.

Leadership Presence

As a leadership coach, Baldoni specializes in helping executives develop "leadership presence." He defines the term as "earned authority." That is, people look to you as a leader because they trust you. "They trust you because you have given them good reason to do so." In other words, you have led by example, delegated both authority and responsibility, and challenged appropriately. Underlying all of this is good communication-- sincere, honest, and most of all, two-way communication.

"Listening is the one thing that emerging leaders forget to do," says Baldoni. "They are so focused on doing, that is, projecting outward that do not take the time to listen to what others have to say." Big mistake, and those leaders who grow and develop learn quickly that their greatest resource is their own people. And they must listen to them.

Baldoni challenges leaders to focus energy into listening as they would focus energy into speaking in public. He also asks them to follow the time-tested methods of active listening: relax your facial muscles, make eye contact, ask open-ended questions, and paraphrase. And most important, check for understanding; if you've been delivering a message, ask your employee to state in his own words what you've asked him to do. And likewise, do the same for your employees if they have delivered a message to you.

Varying Your Style

Baldoni varies his communication style according to what he is doing. As a consultant, he helps clients develop messages that do two things: one, relate the big picture; two, play up the WIFM. "People don't engage on strategy. They engage on the personal. You have to win their hearts and minds." One of the best ways to do this is through stories. Baldoni urges leaders to share stories from their own lives as well as the lives of their people. "I always ask people to recall a memorable speech," says Baldoni. "Dollars to doughnuts what they remember most is a story - not a fact or a chart."

As a leadership coach, Baldoni turns the tables. "So much of coaching is listening," says Baldoni, "enabling your client to explain context and situation. Your job is to ask questions that enable the person to come to a moment of awareness for self-improvement." Then you work on an action plan to put good intentions into specific steps, many of which focus on communication--listening first, speaking second; checking for understanding; and speaking clearly and concisely.

"What I try to do in all my work is demonstrate two simple points," says Baldoni. "One, leadership is not about you the leader. Your job is to create conditions for people to succeed. That means you must make the hard and tough decisions to make it possible for the individual, the team, and the organization to move forward. Two, leadership is all about you, the leader. That is, if you don't create those conditions for people to succeed, who else will? That's what we call leading by example."

[Note: Many of John Baldoni's articles and information on his books can be obtained on his Website at www.johnbaldoni.com.]