

The Greatest Skill- Communication by John C. Maxwell

Leaders must connect with the people they're leading.

One summer, during a family trip, my grand kids decided they wanted to put on a parade for us grown-ups. Amused, we helped them gather balloons, hats and whistles while the children debated who'd lead this extravagant show.

It was decided that Little John, who was maybe 4 at the time, would determine the parade route. The kids invented signals: When Little John raised his hand, they would stop; when he lowered it, they'd move.

Well, the group hadn't even completed its first lap around the swimming pool before Little John lost all interest in taking anyone anywhere. He just loved the power of stopping and starting, stopping and starting. I laughed watching my halting marchers, but then it struck me: Little John is just like a lot of leaders—not taking anyone anywhere. He just liked the power of telling the other kids what to do!

The other kids, like your followers and mine, expected to go somewhere, even if only around the pool, and it didn't take long before they abandoned Little John's lead altogether. I had once been just like my namesake, fulfilling my own needs, writing my own journey, and not paying a whole lot of attention to what anyone else needed or wanted.

I share the story because I want to talk about communicating with people. For true leaders, it's not about one-sided lecturing or dominating an organization. It's an ability learned over time and truly the greatest skill a leader can possess.

1. Value people and let them know it.

I, me, my... these words can too easily govern our thinking and our speaking. That was my biggest mistake as a young leader: I thought leading meant articulating my vision.

Did my followers buy into that vision? Did they have ideas that could make the goals and action steps stronger? I had no idea. I didn't ask.

My friend Zig Ziglar straightened me out. He said, "If you will help people get what they want, they will help you get what you want."

When you consult with someone, you show the person that you value him or her. You affirm that person's intelligence, worthiness and contribution to your organization. The follower, then, becomes a leader in his or her own right.

Leadership is influence, and the ability to connect with other people is how we influence others.

2. Learn to listen.

Don't fall in love with the sound of your own voice. All leaders are brimming with thoughts, but if you want truly innovative ideas, you need to combine your wisdom with the knowledge of your people.

A great idea is nothing more than three or four good ideas put together. And how do you get three or four good ideas? By listening.

Listening has other payoffs. It creates respect, strengthens relationships and builds loyalty. And you'll get to know the members of your team. That's important. Leaders lead each team member differently, depending on the person's unique circumstances, personality and goals. Managers lead everyone the same way. You

want to be a leader.

3. Believe and live what you communicate.

There will be times when you command the conversation, and rightly so. But when you talk, you need to be credible.

In my early days, I thought I had to be an expert on everything to be a credible leader. I was an “answer man” and unwilling to admit when I didn’t fully grasp a subject. As I matured, I realized this was a mistake. I actually had less credibility when I tried to fake it.

So I learned to lean on the expertise of others. Then I refined my idea of credibility even further by making sure to teach only what I fully believe. As I whittled my teaching to core principles, my passion and conviction intensified.

A sure way to lose followers fast is to say one thing and do another—you won’t believe how quickly they abandon you. All the slick talk in the world won’t disguise that disconnect.

4. Master communication skills.

“You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can’t get them across, your ideas won’t get you anywhere,” said legendary Chrysler CEO Lee Iacocca.

You can read volumes on how to communicate, but I boil it down to mastering the three “C’s.”

Clarity: When I see leaders trying to impress people by using big words or complex sentences, I cringe. If you want to connect with people, you need to keep it simple. You also need to be specific. If you offer up overly broad terms and vaguely defined goals, no one will know what to do.

Continuity: Boy, I really botched this up when I was young. I thought I could just lay out my vision and move on. It took me years to understand that I needed to continually restate my organization’s mission. I learned that you sometimes need to repeat your message six times before people internalize it. And because of the importance of continuity, you need...

Creativity: You have to find new ways to state ongoing goals, lest your audience tune out. Try new metaphors; appeal to people’s different senses. Some people are auditory learners, some are visual, and others need hands-on experience to grasp a concept.

Let me leave you with this story:

Some time ago, I sat at a board meeting listening to an issue that had sparked a lot of debate. One member had an excellent point that was worth discussing, but he fumbled through his words, taking far too long to make his point and losing his colleagues’ attention.

Another board member was a clear and assertive communicator. His premise wasn’t as strong, but he connected with his fellow board members, who bought into his opinion.

If you can’t communicate clearly, it doesn’t matter what your vision, message or direction is. You’ve got to connect with me if you want me to follow on your journey.