

## BONUS PRINCIPLE: STAYING ON MESSAGE

When you watch major candidates for political office on television, it is easy to become enamored of their ability to articulate so effortlessly. We are often impressed with their talent for speaking candidly in front of large groups, handling tough questions, and participating in debates with the nation's leading journalists. Would it surprise you to know that these candidates spend hours doing debate prep, speech prep, and media prep? The fact that major league players all undergo significant training shows us just how challenging effective communication can be without the right tools. But the good news for all of us is that it also shows that if they can do it, so can we.

I have helped train several candidates for political office over the years, and one approach I often take is that of playing the role of either a reporter or an opponent. And I can attest to the fact that the axiom "stay on message" is a phrase by which campaigns and candidates live and die. Politicians and the press play a delicate chess game with each other. The

press tries very hard to make the politician answer something he or she doesn't want to answer. The politician tries at all times to answer the question in a way that will ensure his or her message gets out loud and clear, no matter what.

Staying on message is about controlling the context of the message and not allowing other people or circumstances to detract from or in any way change what you want to say.

In the 1992 race for the White House, the message, as you may remember, was "It's the economy, stupid." And this message was preached time and again by James Carville.

In 2004, the message for both candidates was keeping America safe.

Many political pundits blame Rudy Giuliani's failure to gain the Republican presidential nomination in 2008 on the fact that he was "off-message" in his campaign and spent a significant amount of time talking about terrorism when the country was once again concerned with the economy.

Similarly, analysts will point to Barack Obama's success in the primary election as the result of his staying on message about change.

In politics, the message can change almost hourly, and politicians and their highly paid operatives work diligently to keep the candidates on their message. Most campaigns have a "message of the week" or "message of the day." For an entire week or day, they may talk about nothing but the environment or taxes or health care, for example. But what does this mean for us? How do we learn to stay on message and not get pulled in different directions? Staying on message is a very important part of public speaking and of effective communication in general, and it is a critical lesson to master.

Staying on message is about gaining control over how the audience perceives you and what you are discussing. We have discussed how easily an audience can become distracted, but it is even easier for a speaker to become distracted by a tough question or a question that seems to come from left field and throws the speaker for a loop.

First and foremost, you have to know what your message is. What are you trying to get across? Discovering the central theme of your message is the first step in this process.

If you think back to English class, when you first learned how to construct a thesis, you probably learned the importance of opening a term paper with a few lines that serve as the thesis, or main point, you are going to prove. As speakers, we should follow this rule as well. Before you speak, go into an interview, or talk to the press, think carefully about the central point you are going to prove. This is the message that you need to convey early on in your interview or speech.

The message is your key point, and everything that follows is used to prove that point. The message should be one line. The one line that is going to be the basis for your entire speech. Everything else follows after this one line.

Message examples:

- *I am the best person for this job.*
- *Our firm is best equipped for this project.*
- *I will fix our broken economy.*
- *Nantucket is the best place to visit over the summer.*
- *The \_\_\_\_\_ Party won't do anything to control rising gas prices.*

- *Invest your money with our firm and watch with confidence as it grows.*
- *Faith is the most precious gift.*
- *Perseverance is the key ingredient to success.*
- *List your home with us and watch it sell!*
- *Our company is dedicated to the safety of our consumers.*
- *We take full responsibility for this and pledge to immediately address the problem.*

Everything that follows from this point forward will ultimately be used to prove your main point. But before you can prove your point, you must first prove your credibility before your audience. Only if you do this successfully will your audience—or the press—believe that you have the expertise to know what you are talking about.

### **The Credibility Connection**

If a candidate for the presidency who was fired from every job he ever held in his entire life gave a major address on the economy, you would probably dismiss him outright as having no credibility on the subject. That is, unless you didn't know that he was fired from every job he ever held and he articulated his position in a manner that clearly proved he knew what he was talking about, citing extensive research on the subject or stories to prove his point. Similarly, a candidate who is a Nobel Prize-winning economist but fails to let the audience know this and doesn't take the time necessary to build his credibility through examples and research

will probably be viewed as underqualified and his message similarly dismissed.

I'm not making this up. We see it all the time.

Audiences have their own ways to determine who and what is credible, and that is why it is important to make a credibility connection with your audience before you try to prove your message.

To gain credibility with an audience, clearly state what gives you the right to speak on your subject. Examples might be:

- Experience in the area
- Educational background
- Awards
- Published articles
- Specific knowledge
- Research
- Past accomplishments
- Detailed plan of action

### **Principles in Action**

John from Genesis Engineering wants everyone to understand that his engineering company can handle the project of building a new bridge between New York and New Jersey. So, the message is, "Our company has the expertise to handle this project, and we should be awarded the contract."

John will use the first few lines of his speech for the introduction, but then he will quickly state his message: "Hi, my

name is John, thank you for coming tonight. I'd like to tell you a little about my company, Genesis Engineering, and explain that we are in fact, best suited to be chosen as the company to build the new \$2.1 billion bridge."

Now it is time for John to make a credibility connection with his audience. He might use this time to let the audience know he graduated from one of the top engineering universities in America, or he might use an example of other major bridges his company has designed and built. John has to decide how best to use the limited amount of time he has to establish his credibility connection: "I graduated from Engineering University of America." Or "I helped design and build a very successful bridge."

Similarly, there are many ways for us to explain our credibility, but we always want to think about the strongest points that maximize our credibility on the subject. In John's case, his best option would be to explain that he helped build the George Washington Bridge, the Brooklyn Bridge, and the Golden Gate Bridge. This establishes his credibility and reinforces his message.

Once you establish your credibility, it is time to prove your point while staying on message using examples and stories. This is the dangerous sea where speakers often find their ships crashing into the infinite morass of choices. We can speak about so many things, but the less focused our message, the more likely that we will go off course. Consider your message like a laser beam. You want to carefully aim it at your target. Everything that is said must be used to support your message with precision, because if you get off-message, you may find it difficult ever to come back.

Ask yourself:

What examples can I use to support my message?

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Is there a story I can tell to support my message or enhance my credibility?

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What important facts and figures do I need to convey to support my message?

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The rule is simple: If it doesn't support your message, replace it with something that does.

John may think this is an opportune time for him to share a story about his experience working on a tunnel project. It may be tempting for him to tell a funny story about how he had dirt fall on his head during a tunnel inspection, but that doesn't help prove his point: that he and his firm are qualified to build a bridge. He needs to stay on message and tell a story that helps prove the fact that his company is, in fact, best suited to build the new \$2.1 billion bridge.

Perhaps John should tell a story about another bridge project he worked on that was able to save the client time and money. By telling the story, John will reassert his credibility while keeping the audience interested. The audience will hear the story and think, "Wow, this guy really knows what he is talking about." As we learned in Principle 5, stories have power. Simply stating experience is not nearly as powerful or effective as telling a story that shows experience.

After John has spent a few minutes building his credibility, he should move on to explain why his company should build this particular bridge. If you are wondering why he shouldn't get to that part sooner, it is because he *must* establish credibility before people will accept what he is saying as fact. If John were simply to start talking about why he could build the bridge without giving the expertise and story that *prove* his thesis, he would not be staying on message. The message is, "We have the expertise." Well, stay on message and prove your claim to us!

After establishing his credibility, John can speak about the specific project at hand, explaining why his firm should get the job because he will save the city or state money while building the safest, most advanced bridge possible. Assuming John follows this method, the audience has already accepted John's credibility and will be receptive to his message.

Now it is time for the closing. At this point, John should rephrase his thesis, "We are best suited for this \$2.1 billion bridge project because we will build the safest, most affordable, most advanced bridge possible, and this is evidenced by our twenty-five years of experience and solid credentials." He's restated the thesis, and now he can close his speech.

"I hope you all enjoyed your dinner. Thank you again for coming. Good night."

The net result is that John stayed on message and the audience walked out thinking, *This guy is right, he really is best suited for this project. He really knows what's he's talking about.*

Recently, I conducted a three-day, intensive communications seminar with fourteen senior directors of a large northeastern engineering firm. The goal of the training was to help each director understand how to communicate the firm's message. When I first arrived, I was amazed to see just how off-message the directors were as a group. Each of fourteen directors overseeing a different department within the larger company articulated a different message about the firm and about his or her areas of expertise. Like many growing organizations, this firm suffered from an inability to articulate its growth and define its future goals.

We began the training with an overview of the seven principles by making the principles specific to that company and its unique needs. Each director then worked directly with me one-on-one and gave me his "pitch." We filmed each session, and I reviewed the pitch with each person individually. It is remarkable how quickly people can adopt a new style when they have the opportunity to view their performance on camera. Little habits of posture and speaking styles that we are unaware of come to the forefront and I highly recommend videotaping as a way of analyzing and improving style.

After the one-on-one sessions, I reported back to the firm's president and executive vice president and told them that

they, indeed, had a problem. No one in senior management knew the firm's message, and you can imagine that if no one in senior management knew the message, certainly neither did anyone in junior management. So we brought the entire group back into the room and asked the directors a series of questions about the firm so they could work as a group to understand how to construct a message specific and unique to their particular audience. Since the firm handled multi-million-dollar bridge, tunnel, and highway projects and also provided municipal engineering services to small rural communities, providing an overview became increasingly challenging. The firm also had challenges in the sense that it had grown to the point where it was no longer a small firm, but at the same time it wasn't quite a large firm yet. This meant that many of its smaller clients wanted the individual attention only a small firm could provide, so their growing size could be seen as intimidating, while many other prospects were gigantic engineering firms they wanted to partner with, who might view them as too small for their workload.

The firm also had the challenge of geography. Its headquarters are in New Jersey, but it also had offices in New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Delaware, Maryland, and Pennsylvania—areas that represented several unique markets with specific and unique needs. Tailoring the message to suit the particular market would be vital.

The following memorandum is one the company's director of corporate communications created based upon the training session. As you follow along, consider how you would answer these questions for your own company. Understanding how you define key areas such as size, success,

and vision is essential to success. Consider creating a similar guide for you and your team or reaching out to a communications trainer to conduct an in-house program to facilitate this important discussion. Remember, your team truly is your greatest asset. They represent the company twenty-four hours a day, and whenever they are speaking about the company, publicly or privately, it is essential to ensure they have the right message.

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### MEMORANDUM

*All: Thank you all for your involvement in the Communications Training Session. Overall, the session was very effective on various levels. It was terrific to see so many contributing their stories, ideas, and opinions. It also was very beneficial to the group to present each question and gain ideas from Richard Zeoli, an experienced and well-known communications expert, and discuss how to deliver the message, consistently with thorough explanation.*

*As you are aware, this is very important to Genesis as a growing firm. It was critical to determine consistent responses and gain tips on how to deliver them successfully.*

*This session has increased our communication skills both internally and externally and enabled the directors to share their thoughts to their respective teams. If we practice our skills, do our "homework," and critique one another after each event or important meeting, look out ... our vision can be realized within the year! Therefore, compiled below for your reference is a summary and the requested "action items" taken from the session. Looking forward to all of you becoming walking, talking, marketing machines!!!*

**Who is Genesis? What does Genesis do?**

Response: Genesis is a multidisciplinary professional services firm that handles engineering, surveying, and architecture.

- Back up this statement with three specific project examples. It is very common for people to hear things in groups of three.
- When speaking to larger clients, tailor the message to their needs: Genesis is a multidisciplinary professional services firm, and its vast experience includes the Second Avenue Subway, Boston "T" extension, and the Baltimore Expressway. So, we have the capability to handle even the most complex projects.
- When speaking to smaller clients: Genesis is a multidisciplinary professional services firm with a local presence. Our municipal experience includes Main Township Streetscape Design, Sunny Lane Bridge Design, and Soldiers Memorial Park Landscape Design. We have the capability to design projects that reflect the individual needs of the community.

**What size company is Genesis?**

Response: We are a growing firm, and this ensures that we will meet the goals, objectives, and needs of our clients.

- Our people are our strength. Relay our years of experience, accomplishment, and the success of team members.

- When speaking to larger firms, stress the recent new hires and new office openings.
- When speaking to smaller clients, remind them we are still small enough to provide the personalized service they have come to expect from Genesis.

**What makes Genesis different from the other firms?**

Response: Genesis delivers a hands-on team. We are the people who carry through the project from start to finish.

- All face-to-face contact is between the client and us. We do not pass the project on to someone else. We do not bait and switch.
- Introduce all key team players from the start. Always use the three key phrases to describe our work ethic:
  - **Hands-on** (example: Jim's role as project manager on the tunnel)
  - **Involved** every step of the way (example: Bob's role on the bridge project)
  - **Teamwork**—everyone is a partner. Due to our outstanding teamwork, Genesis has never failed to obtain an environmental permit on any project.

**What are some of the stories of Genesis's success we would like to share?**

- Provide three success stories that will appeal to a smaller potential client (municipal level or small firm).
- Provide three success stories that will appeal to a large potential client (major engineering firm we would like to partner with).

- How do we demonstrate our worth to larger firms of over ten thousand people?
- How do we sell ourselves to small towns of less than ten thousand people?

Response for large targets:

- Demonstrate how we can win!
- Pitch success we have had on large projects with large clients. Use words like “partner” and “team” rather than “assist” or “support” or “help.”
- Do not make it seem Genesis is second tier.

Response for small targets:

- Local presence.
- Dedicated project manager, single point of contact.
- High level of client service.

We have completed the work successfully, gaining more work from the client because we completed the project on time and within budget.

#### **What is Genesis's vision for the future?**

Response: Genesis will grow from the preeminent regional engineering firm and gain a *nationwide presence*.

- As directors, bring vision to your team and believe in our success. Move from “dream” to “vision” to “state of mind.” A dream happens subconsciously with your eyes closed. A vision is a tangible goal. Your audience will tend to follow those who give a “clear” vision.
- Where do you see Genesis in five years?
- What will others be saying about Genesis in five years?

#### **Why are Genesis's people important to the process?**

Response: Our people are our greatest strength.

- Genesis has developed a climate to attract and retain the best individuals and challenge them with the best projects.
- Some important points to remember:
  - Talk in terms of accomplishment and how the team has overcome challenges.
  - Define responses by showing strengths. The strength of our people is our advantage versus the larger competitors.
  - Stay on message and tailor the message to the right audience.
  - Know your audience before you walk into the room.
  - Be concise. Leave them wanting more.

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The memorandum demonstrates that Genesis learned a great deal about how to tailor the message for the specific audience and how to stick to that message. They also learned how to communicate their vision externally and internally. It was a very successful training seminar, and I have since worked with several of the newest managers. The firm continues to grow to new heights as they land both small and large clients because their message is always tailored to highlight their relevant strengths depending on the target audience.



## Visuals

Prior to the training, Genesis Engineering fell into the trap, like many organizations do, of focusing on listing experience and capabilities rather than telling stories that *prove* the company's experience and capabilities. Anyone can tell you he or she can do something. Someone can tell you he is capable of orbiting space, but when an astronaut tells you the story of what life was like on a shuttle that was actually orbiting the earth, who has more credibility?

So many organizations are caught in this trap, yet they wonder why their business isn't seeing the growth it is capable of achieving.

The answer lies in showing rather than telling. There is an old saying in acting: "Show, don't tell." Basically, this means that as an actor, you must show the audience how you feel, rather than telling them. One of my favorite scenes in movie history is so subtle that unless you are obsessed with the movie, you might miss it. Yet it is one of the reasons *The Godfather* is so successful.

In the scene, Michael Corleone, who is destined to become the ruthless leader of the Mafia, is still outside the family business and goes to the hospital to see his father, Vito Corleone, who has been gunned down by rival gangsters. Realizing that no one is guarding his father and that people are coming to kill him, Michael stands outside the hospital along with the family baker and pretends to have a weapon as the carload of gangsters arrives to carry out the deed.

Seeing the "armed" guards, the driver pulls away. Afterward, the baker is shaking so badly from nervousness

that he cannot light his cigarette. He fumbles with the lighter and Michael takes the lighter and effortlessly lights the cigarette for him. Michael glances at his own hands to realize that they are not shaking.

Film students and scholars recognize that the scene shows that this was not a terrifying experience for Michael and actually foreshadows his inevitable turn toward violence. It is incredibly effective and one of the reasons that the movie won so many Academy Awards. Yet, it would not have been as effective if Michael had instead said, "Wow, that just didn't bother me in the least! In fact, I kind of liked it!" That is a perfect example of "show, don't tell."

Yet so many companies try to tell their experience and qualifications instead of actually showing their experience and qualifications. This often backfires in PowerPoint slides and handouts.

I've actually seen companies put things on a slideshow such as:

- Our company has the experience to build this project.
- We worked on three highway projects this past year.

And then they will put up a slide that shows a picture of the highway. Nice visual, but not at all effective. Even though it is a visual, it is an attempt to tell rather than show. Herein lies the rub of relying on visuals like PowerPoint and storyboards in a presentation.

I told Genesis that I don't particularly like the use of PowerPoint presentations, and the company management said it was absolutely critical for them when they are mak-

ing a presentation. It might be, but it's no excuse to rely on PowerPoint or visuals to do the presentation *for* you.

Pictures may tell a thousand words, but let's go back to the astronaut analogy for a moment. We can see a picture of a man walking on the moon and it says one thing to us. But when we hear Neil Armstrong tell the story of walking on the moon, it becomes entirely more meaningful. This is the reason that his famous quote, "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," resonates so powerfully even to this day. It tells a story of tremendous accomplishment that a simple picture cannot tell by itself.

Please do not misunderstand me. Pictures have a place, but unless you are giving a presentation on the power of pictures, as a presenter you should not rely solely on them. That's because a story, along with a picture, does so much to prove your point and make the presentation that much more valuable than a picture alone.

A better way for the engineering company to tell its story would be to create a slide that says, "With more than forty years of experience, including multimillion-dollar projects, we have the expertise to do this job."

Perhaps Slide 2 could show the picture of a project that was once dilapidated, and then the speaker can tell the story that accompanies the visual of how challenging it was to face this project and iron out a plan for fixing the structure. Most presenters will simply show the slide and allow the audience to form its own opinions. Some audience members will be impressed, but others will not be. But when the speaker shows the visual, tells the story, makes it personal, and puts it into human terms to which we can all relate, that speaker is taking the visual to the next level.

I recently watched a PowerPoint presentation in which the speaker put up a slide of the game of "Pong" on the screen, then flashed to a slide of the game "Donkey Kong," then a slide of a modern-day game in which the character looked incredibly lifelike.

The caption above the Pong slide read, "first video game." On top of Donkey Kong, it said, "innovation advances," and on top of the modern slide it said, "quality enhancements."

The speaker went through each slide and then tried to tie the games into our health care system to attempt to prove his point, which was, "By using electronic records, we will get better health care."

If you were an audience member and were confused, you were not alone. Most of the people in the audience were confused, and the presentation was not effective. I have no doubt that someone very creative worked hard to insert those visuals, thinking they would be interesting. And while perhaps they were, they certainly did not do a good job of telling the story.

However, when the speaker used an actual testimonial from a person who had lost all her medical records in a natural disaster but was still able to continue to receive health care because her doctor had backed up her records electronically, a lightbulb suddenly went off in the room, and everyone understood the importance of using electronic records.

One story was much more effective than several pictures of a giant ape throwing barrels.

My advice to this presenter was simple: Get rid of the PowerPoint and instead create a live video testimonial of an actual person telling her story. Or, if cost is a problem, read

her testimonial to everyone in the room. Do not make the mistake of relying on PowerPoint or visuals to tell a story. Even though they are visuals, they wind up telling rather than showing. That is the irony of relying on visuals. The presenter in this case tried to tell us that innovation took time by putting up a cute picture of Donkey Kong when in reality, the patient testimonial accomplished everything he was trying to prove in a fraction of the time.

As for the engineering firm we talked about earlier in this chapter, I would advise the presenter or presenters to certainly show the pretty picture of the highway the firm designed, but I would also encourage them to use it as backdrop and to have someone share the story of how the highway was designed. Share the challenges, the hurdles, the victories. These stories, as we learned in Principle 6, will do so much more to prove credibility and experience than a picture ever can.

Again, we love the picture of the astronauts walking on the moon, but we can't relate to it. We can, however, relate to the fear they experienced before taking off from earth. We can relate to the euphoria they felt when they took that one small step, and we can relate to the feeling that their mission had a purpose much larger than themselves.

The picture as a background is great. And combined with the story from the astronaut who was actually there or from the person in mission control who gave the prelaunch countdown, it is powerful and will ensure your audience is interested, engaged, and convinced of your credibility, ability, and experience.