



## COMMUNICATION – A LEADER’S KEY TO SUCCESS

By Dr. John C. Maxwell

For my whole life, I have opened my car door by inserting a metal key into a physical lock. Now, I can unlock the doors and start the car at the push of a button. It seems like magic to me, but it’s actually a simple application of science.

Keyless entry and keyless ignition are made possible when a transmitter within your key fob communicates with a radio receiver inside the car. Two conditions are necessary for this communication to take place: 1) the transmitter must be set to the same frequency as the receiver, and 2) the transmitter must send a uniquely coded message which the receiver has been programmed in advance to recognize.

Communication acts as a leader’s “keyless entry” into relationships. It can open the mind of an employer, the wallet of investors, and the hearts of loved ones. Talented communicators seem magical when they weave their words together. However, much like the concept of keyless entry, great communication depends on two simple skills—context and delivery. Context attunes a leader to the same frequency as his or her audience. Delivery allows a leader to phrase messages in a language the audience can understand.

As we explore context and delivery, we’ll draw upon Steven K. Scott’s book, *The Richest Man Who Ever Lived*. In the book, Scott offers commentary on the words of King Solomon, the wealthiest man in history. Renowned for his wisdom, Solomon writings are filled with advice about effective communication.

### CONTEXT

Listen before Speaking

*“He that answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame unto him.” ~ Proverbs 18:13*

Earn the right to be heard by listening to others. Seek to understand a situation before making judgments about it. As the Greek philosopher, Epictetus, observed, “We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.”

Understand Human Nature

*“Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” ~ Proverbs 12:18*

Words are powerful, and they can build up or tear down those who hear them. Regardless of your audience or avenue of communication, the following principles enable you to communicate constructively.

People are insecure. Leaders can bestow confidence by demonstrating their trust and belief in a person’s abilities. People want to feel special. Leaders win a loyal following when they are generous with compliments and acts of appreciation. People are looking for a better future.

Leaders inspire through an optimistic outlook and words of hope. People are selfish. Leaders learn to motivate when they begin speaking to the needs of their people.

#### Be Emotionally Aware

*“Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day...is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.” ~ Proverbs 25:20*

Communicating within context involves taking the emotional temperature of others. Pay attention to facial expressions, voice inflection, and posture. They give clues to a person’s mood and attitude.

### DELIVERY

#### Adopt an Appropriate Tone

*“A soft answer turns away wrath but grievous words stir up anger.” ~ Proverbs 15:1*

When you’re emotionally aware, you’re halfway to effective communication, but you still have to deliver your words appropriately. Many times it’s not what you say, but how you say it. Adopt a fitting tone to address the emotional state of those around you, and your words will have their desired effect.

#### Speak Persuasively

*“The heart of the wise teaches his mouth and adds persuasiveness to his lips.” ~ Proverbs 16:23*

The National Storytelling Festival, held in Jonesborough, Tennessee features some of America’s most captivating communicators. Listen for awhile, and you’ll discover traits that allow them to persuade listeners to take interest in the stories they tell.

Enthusiasm. The storytellers obviously enjoy what they are doing, expressing themselves with joy and vitality. Animation. The presentations are marked by lively facial expressions and gestures. Audience Participation. Almost every storyteller involves the audience in some way, asking listeners to sing, clap, repeat phrases, or do sign language. Spontaneity. None of the storytellers have notes. The festival is truly an oral event. Storytellers didn’t read their stories; they tell them, which allowed for eye contact.

#### Be Honest

*“He who conceals his hatred has lying lips, and whoever spreads slander is a fool.” ~ Proverbs 10:18*

In an effort to persuade, leaders may be tempted to cross the line into manipulation. When doing so, facts may be fabricated or spun deceptively. Lies add complexity to life since the liar has to operate under the guise of falsehood. Eventually, lies are brought to light and undermine credibility. Leaders protect their character by using discretion in their language. They speak truthfully—even when honesty is costly.

### SUMMARY

Poor communication is the number one culprit of failed relationships—in business and at home. Since relationships are the foundation of success, leaders would be wise to invest in the communication skills of context and delivery. Master them, and you’ll more easily gain favor, more readily make friends, and more effectively motivate others.



## GETTING UNSTUCK

Whether trapped in traffic or stalled in a slow-moving grocery line, we hate to feel stuck. Yet, as much as we despise it, we can stomach an extra hour on the commute home or ten additional minutes at the supermarket. What really causes us stress is the feeling of our entire life being stuck—either personally or professionally. Perhaps a relationship we had hoped would takeoff begins to sputter. Or maybe a promising career path hits a roadblock. Whatever the case, we all go through times when our progress is thwarted, and we can't seem to get back on track. When life's motion ceases, life's emotions hit with full force. Fear, frustration, and discouragement lodge themselves in our insides.

Take a moment to put yourself in the following scenarios. Monitor your feelings as you read. What emotions surface?

### Scenario #1

*You're a small child playing outdoors with a group of friends on a wintry day. One of your friends challenges you to put your tongue on flagpole. "No way," you say. After all, you've heard horror stories about what might happen. "Chicken!" "Scaredy Cat!" "Sissy!" The taunts of your peers come tumbling at you, one after another. Under the barrage of insults, your resolve weakens. Finally, the coolest kid in class pushes you over the edge with his challenge, "I double-dog dare you!" Left without a route of escape, you summon the courage to put your tongue on the icy flagpole, and...it freezes solid. You're stuck!*

### Scenario #2

*You're having a nightmare. In your dream, you're being chased through dark streets by henchmen in ski masks. Sprinting full speed, you make a series of sharp turns through alleys and side streets to elude them. Out of breath, you crouch behind a trash compactor and look down the abandoned street for your pursuers. At first, no one is in sight, but as you peer into the blackness you make out the shapes of the thugs coming toward you. Hiding in the shadows, you pray they won't see you. Closer and closer the henchmen get until they are a few feet away. Thankfully, they pass by without noticing you. That is, until you shift your weight and accidentally kick a bottle. Startled by the noise, the bad guys wheel around and spy your hideout. Shouting threats, they rush toward you. You try to run away, but you're frozen! It's as if your feet have taken root in the pavement. The masked men are racing toward you, but your legs won't work! You're stuck!*

## CRISIS

Like a panicked child whose tongue is on the flagpole, being stuck brings a flood of frightful questions to mind. "Will I ever break free? Am I doomed to stay in this spot forever? How did I end up *here*?"

Life's standstills generate fear inside of us. They are much like the dream in which we feel cornered, paralyzed, and unable to escape. Depending on the situation, we may fear insignificance, unmet desires, or financial shortfall. In response to fear, we freeze. When dealing the shock of being stuck, we're unable to make changes.

We use the phrase "mid-life *crisis*" for a reason. When we find ourselves growing older and not getting nearer to our career goals, we experience unnerving emotions of alarm. The intensity of emotion mirrors the feelings we might expect in an emergency.

## GETTING UNSTUCK

As agonizing as life's standstills may be, the experience of being stuck may have its advantages. That's the hopeful message from Dr. Timothy Butler of Harvard Business School, author of *Getting Unstuck: How Dead Ends Become New Paths*. In an interview about his book, Dr. Butler casts light on two benefits of being stuck—an experience he refers to as impasse.

First, impasse may serve as a catalyst for change. Second, impasse leads us into greater insight about ourselves. In both cases, being stuck navigates us to a better position on life's journey.

#### CRISIS OR CATALYST?

Like the frustration of sitting in traffic, an impasse can be exasperating. It may seem like no matter what we try to tweak, nothing produces a result. After exhausting our willpower, we are left feeling helpless, hopeless, and defeated.

Surprisingly, a rock-bottom emotional experience may be the perfect ingredient to inspire change. As is famously quoted, "Necessity is the mother of invention." In reaching the breaking point, we are pushed to open ourselves to possibilities which we may have never considered otherwise. In the words of Dr. Butler, "The meaning of an impasse, although it's usually first expressed as a failure or in an internalized notion of inadequacy, is a request for us to change our way of thinking about ourselves and our place in the world." Forced to discard our existing mental map of the world, we construct a fresh perspective.

#### CRISIS OR COUNSELOR?

When life stagnates, we turn inward and question ourselves, asking "Why am I not happy? How did I end up so far from where I want to be? What am I doing wrong?"

A crisis season of soul-searching counsels us about our desires and dreams; flaws and failures; likes and dislikes. During these times, we undergo a renewing process of self-discovery. "Each impasse is an opportunity to look a little deeper and understand better what works for us," writes Butler. "The more we know ourselves, the less we are thrown by the next impasse." By putting us in touch with our core beliefs and habits of personal behavior, being stuck actually serves as an enlightening experience.

For Dr. Timothy Butler's insights on seasons of impasse, visit Harvard Business School's Working Knowledge webpage: <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/5548.html>

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#### BOOK REVIEW

*Egonomics: What Makes Ego Our Greatest Asset (Or Most Expensive Liability)*  
By David Markum and Steven Smith (Simon & Schuster, 2007)

When thinking of our financial health, we consider our earnings potential, property holdings, or investment portfolio. Our ego never enters into the picture. After all, what does ego have to do with making money? Plenty, according to David Markum and Steven Smith, authors of *Egonomics*.

By tracing an inflated ego's impact on missed opportunities, botched ventures, and calamitous strategic choices, Markum and Smith make a persuasive case for the monetary implications of ego. Citing academic research, they blame an overabundance of ego for 1/3 of failed business decisions made by leaders. According to the authors, ego drains our value by counterfeiting our

strengths with destructive substitutes. For example, when ego runs amuck, courage deviates into recklessness, discernment twists into a judgmental attitude, and confidence is distorted as self-centeredness.

In the opening chapter, Markum and Smith are careful to trumpet the benefits of ego alongside its drawbacks. Describing ego as healthy self-pride, the authors laud its ability to override fear, apathy, and doubt. However, once the first chapter ends, the remainder of *Egonomics* spotlights the dangers posed by excessive ego. Such a negative, one-sided treatment of ego seems mystifying given the book's subtitle and early tone.

Both authors have done work in psychology, and their backgrounds flavor the book. Nowhere is this more evident than in Chapter Eight and Chapter Nine. Both chapters discuss how to mix humility into the emotion and energy of workplace conversations. In doing so, emphasis is given to the mental and emotional challenges involved. Within the two chapters, the authors' content about curiosity, particularly on page 182, stands out as worthy of exploration.

Readers in search of *Egonomics*' most valuable content should make a beeline for Chapter Seven. In it, the authors brilliantly clear up misconceptions surrounding the trait of humility. According to Markum and Smith, a common perception is that humility is not compatible with the competitive climate of the workplace. As a result, it is often equated with weakness, timidity, or submissiveness. Rebutting this mindset, the authors tout humility as a chief leadership virtue. To help readers gain a fuller appreciation of humility, Markum and Smith spell out three characteristics of humble leaders. In doing so, they favor readers with stellar material worthy of careful attention.

The style of *Egonomics* is slightly academic, but not too weighty and certainly not dull. Cover-to-cover, the book has solid content with occasional stretches of remarkable insight. Throughout, Markum and Smith offer rich observations about the intersection of ego and leadership. LW subscribers are likely to walk away from *Egonomics* with a newfound appreciation for the role of humility in leadership, and those who pick up a copy will be thankful they did.

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## COMPROMISE

"Compromise, if not the spice of life, is its solidity. It is what makes nations great and marriages happy."

~ Phyllis McGinley

"People talk about the middle of the road as though it were unacceptable. Actually, all human problems, excepting morals, come into the gray areas. Things are not all black and white. There have to be compromises. The middle of the road is all of the usable surface. The extremes, right and left, are in the gutters."

~ Dwight D. Eisenhower

"Unless both sides win, no agreement can be permanent."

~ Jimmy Carter

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Maximum Impact, Inc.  
3760 Peachtree Crest Dr.  
Suite A  
Duluth, GA 30097