



Business  
Off the Shelf

# Secret of leaders' success is communicating well

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Plan on leaving work early this week to catch an episode of The Oprah Winfrey Show.

Great Communication Secrets of Great Leaders

By **John Baldoni**

(McGraw-Hill, \$20.95 Cdn)

If anyone gives you grief, say it's for research. You're watching and learning how Oprah tells stories. How she engages with her audience. How she celebrates accomplishments and successes. How she listens and talks with her guests and puts everyone at ease. How she inspires people to pursue their dreams and make major life changes. How she tackles big, important issues and makes everyone feel better about themselves.

Oprah is a hugely successful talk show host, business owner and consummate communicator.

"The key to her success and influence is simple," says author and leadership consultant **John Baldoni**. "She has an ability to communicate and connect with people in a way that makes her seem accessible as well as intuitive. When Oprah speaks, people listen."

Once you've watched the show, go back to work and be more like Oprah. Your employees will thank you. They expect you to communicate. They want you to talk with them about important things, like where the company is headed, what it will take to get there and how they can play a part. They want to know where you stand, what you believe in and what stirs your passions.

As a leader, you're obliged to deliver. An inability or unwillingness to communicate is no excuse. You're putting your company, your employees' livelihoods and your own career at risk. Fortune magazine took a look at why corporations fail. Four of the 10 reasons cited (see no evil, a dysfunctional board, fearing the boss and a dangerous culture) can be directly tied to a failure to communicate.

"Leaders who fail in communications will fail to achieve their organizational aims," says Baldoni.

"Leaders who communicate regularly and frequently, both in good times and in bad, will improve organizational and individual performance, get results and create a successful enterprise. And with each passing year the imperative for good communications grows stronger."

Maybe you know the value of communicating but you're just too busy. Your calendar shows a tentative half-hour of free time in late December. Closed door meetings and strategic decision-making consume your days.

"Often leaders are so busy doing all the other important things related to managing systems and people that they simply run out of time and thus do not communicate effectively. Communications requires discipline, though, perseverance, and the willingness to do it again and again every day."

So you're going to make a concerted effort to communicate more frequently. What do you talk about?

Focus on what matters most. Messages from the top should do one or more of the following:

- \* Affirm your organization's vision and mission. Tell people where the company is headed and what it stands for.
- \* Drive transformational initiatives. Get employees ready and willing for change. Drive home the need to rethink and remake the organization.
- \* Issue a call to action. Rally the workforce behind an initiative or cause. Tell people what to do and, at a very high level, how to do it.
- \* Reinforce organizational capability. Talk about your organization's strengths. Get people feeling good about their organization and confident in their abilities.
- \* Create an environment that is motivating. Provide reasons why things are done and create a path of success for people to follow. Describe all the benefits that come with success.

\* Promote what you do. Show how your company's products and services fit your mission, culture and values.

In delivering these messages, aim to inform, involve others by soliciting their input, ignite imaginations and invite participation.

"Leaders who talk about what people can do for themselves and by themselves are leaders who understand their role as inspiring action or change."

Telling stories is your best bet for delivering leadership messages that resonate and stick with your audience. We're hardwired for storytelling. Consider how much of our time and money is spent watching television, going to movies and plays, and reading books. Stories give us a way to relate to -- and make sense of -- the world around us.

"Through storytelling, leaders can frame a current experience through the prism of context and character -- their own or someone else's. Leaders who learn to tell stories are leaders who are innately aware of the human condition, an insight that prepares them to lead others."

Some of the more familiar formats include cautionary tales and human interest stories that take audiences from the valley of despair to the heights of redemption. There's the voyage of self-discovery and the determined pursuit of goals against the toughest and longest of odds. You can tell humorous anecdotes and stories that offer reassurance. You can share your own life stories or talk about people you've met along the way. Whatever format you use, tie the stories in to your leadership messages.

Anyone who is in a leadership position, who is aspiring to become a leader or who provides counsel to leaders should find time to read this book. Baldoni walks you through all the steps of developing, delivering and sustaining effective leadership communications. You'll also learn the secrets of great communicators through profiles of Oprah Winfrey and other successful people, such as Winston Churchill, baseball owner Bill Veeck and New York Yankees coach Joe Torre, Rudy Giuliani, Peter Drucker, and Washington Post editor Katherine Graham.

Baldoni shows that you don't need a high-priced army of spin doctors or speech writers to be an effective communicator. If you need someone to tell you what to say, spend some more time reflecting on what's important to you and your organization. Be open, honest and passionate, and Baldoni says, you'll forge partnerships founded on mutual benefit and cemented by trust.

"Of all the leadership behaviours, the ability to communicate may be the most important. Communications lays the foundation for leading others."

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## Column

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