



Talking with the Receptionist, Pausing When You Speak and Other Secrets of Leadership Success

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Several years ago, while visiting a regional branch of Lee Hecht Harrison, a global career management services company, then-president Stephen Harrison was stopped short by "Ray," his chief operating officer. "You didn't greet the receptionist," said Ray, who proceeded to show Harrison how to do what he called the "two minute schmooze." Introducing himself, Ray inquired about the receptionist's commute and impressions of the company.

Ray explained to Harrison: "A receptionist is a corporate concierge. They will talk to more important people in a day -- suppliers, customers, even CEOs -- than you will talk to all year."

Enron-level scandals are not averted by talking to the receptionist alone, but Harrison, speaking at the recent 11th annual Wharton Leadership Conference, contended that small acts like this are part of what makes for an ethical corporate culture. And culture, not "heavy handed legislation" like the 2002 Sarbanes-Oxley Act, is a key safeguard against moral lapses, he said in his talk.

Also presenting at the conference, which centered on the theme of "Developing Leadership Talent," was Richard Greene, a public speaking coach and author of the book, *Words that Shook the World: 100 Years of Unforgettable Speeches and Events*. Conference sponsors included the [Center for Leadership and Change Management](#), the [Center for Human Resources](#) and [Wharton Executive Education](#).

Executive Pomposity

Harrison, who is now chairman of Lee Hecht Harrison, pointed to the failure of Sarbanes-Oxley to stop incidences of corporate fraud and misconduct. He quoted a 2005 PricewaterhouseCoopers survey that reported a 22% increase in global fraud over the last two years. When the Federal Sentencing Commission discovered this gap between intention and results, said Harrison, it held a year of hearings and then added one line to the Federal Sentencing Guidelines stating that public companies must "promote an organizational culture that encourages ethical conduct."

Shortly after this addition was made, Harrison was appointed Worldwide Chief Ethics and Compliance Officer of Lee Hecht Harrison's parent company, Adecco, a position he held for two years and one that is mandated for publicly traded companies complying with Sarbanes-Oxley. He, along with other newly appointed ethics and compliance officers, wanted to know: What does "ethical culture" mean to the Federal Reserve Board? Harrison spoke with Federal Reserve Board officials and attended conferences where board members addressed the issue.

"All of us had pens in hand, waiting for the answer. They couldn't give it to us," Harrison recalled. "So I decided I would dig into this myself." What he concluded mirrors the words of former SEC Commissioner Cynthia Glassman, who said that while the government can mandate ethical compliance, "we cannot legislate ethical behavior." For Harrison, even the word "ethics" itself seems too abstract; he replaces it with what he sees as a more intuitive, common-sense word: decency.

"Decency is not just about being nice," noted Harrison, author of *The Manager's Book of Decencies*. Rather, it is about creating a "bubble wrap" of good deeds that will protect a company in hard times. "Our willingness to be decent at work cannot depend on whether business is up or whether we're in a bad mood or whether it's raining. Decencies don't amount to anything unless we take the trouble to make them come



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alive through concrete acts in all kinds of weather."

For those at the top, this can mean such actions as being the first to volunteer for ethics training; honoring those with unglamorous jobs, like office cleaning; and listening to people at all levels of the organization. He pointed to the example of Herb Baum, former CEO of Dial, who used to host "Hot Dogs with Herb" on the factory floor, where he invited employees to talk with him about anything on their minds.

Being accessible is as important as being humble, said Harrison. "Remember Ed Koch?" The former mayor of New York, in his second year in office, drove from borough to borough, asking people, "How am I doing?" "He went from being well-liked to well-loved." Harrison also recalled meeting up one night with a long-lost college roommate, Ruben Mark, chairman and CEO of Colgate Palmolive. Over a Japanese dinner, Harrison asked him how he explained his success. "He leaned across the table and said, 'That's easy. I make absolutely sure nothing creative or important is ever identified as my idea,'" said Harrison. "Now that's humility."

He also counseled executives to avoid the trap of "executive pomposity." He first heard that term in a 1967 speech from the CEO of Technico, who spoke specifically about executive "telephone pomposity." Said Harrison: "I have answered my own phone since then."

Being generous with praise and recognition will earn leaders what Harrison calls "psychic income." He gave the example of the chairman and CEO of Campbell Soup who "at the end of every day gathers his people to hear about neat stuff done that day and then handwrites thank-you notes to the people who did it. If you go around Campbell Soup, all over the world, you will find those notes framed."

A key test of a leader's sensitivity comes at layoff time. While Western companies, and particularly American companies, have come to accept the reality of the need for layoffs, "what they should not come to terms with is a downsizing episode that is anything but sensitive, well thought out and has preserving personal dignity as the highest priority," Harrison said.

Immediately after layoffs take place, for example, a leader should be "very visible and accessible," ready to answer questions, reduce anxieties and even assuage the guilt of those who survive the layoffs. "It takes courage to put your chest out, shoulders back, and be there to deal with this. It's a decency, and people will appreciate it."

At the end of the day, said Harrison, the words of poet Maya Angelou ring true: "People will forget what you said, they will even forget what you did, but they will never forget what you made them feel."

Leading with Your Voice

As public speaking coach Richard Greene knows, however, a few unique individuals are able to combine words and feelings in stirring, almost miraculous ways. "I would rather hear Martin Luther King read the Philadelphia White Pages out loud than hear almost anyone in corporate America deliver the 'I have a dream' speech," said Greene during his presentation.

While King had natural gifts that only a chosen few possess, Greene argued that most people have never been trained in public speaking, in part because the subject is not usually taught in schools. "It's a mechanical process and every single employee, with a little bit of intention, focus and time spent, can learn a new skill set. They haven't had a chance to see how good they can be," said Greene.

The first task of a speaker is to realize his or her purpose in speaking, whether it involves addressing several prospective customers across a boardroom table or a convention of thousands. "Public speaking is nothing more than having a conversation about something you're passionate about with two or more people, while you just happen to be standing up, or not," said Greene, who has advised CEOs of Fortune 500 companies and coached presidents, prime ministers, and, in 1996, Diana, Princess of Wales.

One of the biggest pitfalls for speakers in a corporate communication setting is perceiving a speech or presentation as a performance. "It's easy to get nervous and think, 'I want them to know how smart I am and how much I know,'" said Greene. "But if it's just about downloading data, then stay home, hit the send button and save everyone's time and expense."

The best communicators have understood that public speaking is not a performance; it's about making a connection with others, said Greene. "What did Franklin Roosevelt call his weekly radio addresses? Not 'fireside speeches' but 'fireside chats.' He understood that this new technology -- radio -- could be a way to connect with people."

Greene, who began his career as a lawyer, became intrigued by public speaking after watching motivational speaker Tony Robbins. "His ability to work a crowd is unparalleled and I learned a lot from him. I also decided it would be much more fun to do what he was doing, rather than what I was doing, which was being his lawyer."

During the 2000 presidential election, Greene advised Al Gore's campaign to let the then-Democratic nominee speak about environmental issues, but his advice was brushed off by the vice president's campaign on the basis that "no one cares about the environment." "What was missing from Gore in 2000 was a sense of human passion and authenticity. It doesn't matter what you think of global warming: What matters is you see that he believes in something passionately," he said.

Authenticity can help convince an audience that you are bringing something unique to the table, said Greene. "When you're trying to market an idea or product or service, you have to answer two questions the customer has, which are: 'What makes you unique, as compared to your competitors? And how can your uniqueness benefit me?'"

Greene offered some practical tips, including the observation that "the difference between a good speaker and a great speaker is the pause." He recited a piece of the famous King speech: "He said, 'I have a dream' -- pause, pause, pause -- 'that one day' -- pause, pause, pause -- 'this nation will rise up....' He didn't just run it all together, one word after another."

Other simple tools of the trade include making eye contact with audience members even in a large room, establishing a casual relationship by walking in front of a podium rather than standing behind it, and varying voice tone and rhythm. "This is all low-hanging fruit," said Greene, meaning that with a little training, most speakers can improve in these areas.

Of course some public speaking skills are the result of natural gifts, Greene acknowledged, and voice resonance is one of those gifts. Former CBS News anchorman Walter Cronkite won the nation's trust in part because of his deep, full voice, said Greene; on the flip side, Democratic presidential nominee Hubert Humphrey lost the 1968 election in part because his voice was high-pitched and even grating.

As for the current presidential race, Greene predicted that Mitt Romney would win the Republican nomination and Barack Obama the Democratic because both are strong communicators. "There is a continuum of great speakers. Where you are on this continuum is pretty much where you are in terms of overall effectiveness."

He attributes Obama's rapid political rise to the skill of his keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. "It didn't sound like a normal political speech. He spoke from a place of pure nakedness, as if he were saying, 'I'm not even giving a speech; let's just connect.'"

While disparaging an older generation of public speaking advice that recommended viewing audience members in their underwear, Greene offered a different kind of advice that can be summed up in four words: "It's not about you." Referring again to Martin Luther King, Greene said, "He had this ability to reach inside his heart and soul and just bring out what was there. What he cared about at every moment was just getting his message across. He wasn't worrying about how he looked."

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