



It Really Is As Simple As

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WHAT LEADERS CAN LEARN  
FROM MASTERFUL ORATORS  
OF THE PAST

MATT EVENTOFF

Millions of meetings and presentations occur daily. Each of these presentations is meant to drive “someone” to do “something.” And what do the vast majority of these presentations have in common? Unfortunately, they usually fail to get anyone to do anything.

There are so many noble causes led by charismatic, effective leaders, yet it is still difficult for many of these leaders to establish a clear message that resonates and connects with the audience, not due to the content or nobility of cause, but because we are all subject to information overload. But, masterful orators have succeeded in every generation, and one factor that has not changed over time is the ability of a master orator to captivate and move audiences, to attain levels of success that many thought were unachievable at the time. And each of them mastered the ABC’s of communication.

# The ABC's: Action, Brevity, Conviction

Long before you learned to read or write, you needed to master your ABC's. Communication is no different. Before one can create an effective message or master the details of public speaking, body language, gesturing, etc., one must master the ABC's of communicating and messaging.

Over the past decade the ease, access to and speed at which information travels has become blinding. Today, we have access to more information than we could have imagined a short time ago—and perhaps than a human being could ever want, or need. We have entered an information age where today's front page story is literally “yesterday's news.” So how does one make sure his or her voice is “heard?” What are the “secrets” of master orators?

There are a countless number of books written on communications, public speaking, and presenting, many with very good advice and some semblance of practicality. These books are read, re-read, and discussed. What's missing from many of them? Not necessarily the “how” but more importantly the “what.”

*What* do successful messages have in common? *What* do those who have delivered these messages have in common? They all follow the ABC's of communication.

Simply put, Winston Churchill did not use Power Point. Franklin Roosevelt did not put on slideshows. Abraham Lincoln did not have the mediums of television and radio available to disseminate his message to the masses. But, these leaders all mastered basic, fundamental communication principles, including the ABC's.

**ACTION (A CALL TO).** Chances are that a leader wants to move an audience. He or she wants to motivate, persuade or influence an audience to do something, i.e. take action. This idea of doing something can range from taking physical action, (volunteering, protesting, advocating, demonstrating, letter writing) to action less physically active (voting), to something not physical at all (changing a thought process, goal, desire, or in some instances the course of life itself).

President John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address has been one of the two most frequently published addresses in the last 60 years. The most famous statement in the address: "And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man." It is remarkable how powerful these lines were not only when they were originally delivered, but how powerful and important those same lines are six decades later. Why was this speech so effective? Its effectiveness turns on the fact that it was a call to action.

In fact, no less an authority on President Kennedy than his daughter, Caroline Kennedy, sees this call to action as one of the greatest legacies of her father. When describing the inspiration for the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award she notes:

“Ever since I was a little girl, people have told me that my father changed their lives. They got involved in public service, in government, in their communities because he asked them to and they wanted to be part of something larger and better than themselves. President Kennedy’s Inaugural challenge—‘Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country’—inspired a generation in the 1960s that transformed our nation with courage and dedication and in turn inspired those who followed. To me, that is one of his greatest legacies, and it is in them that his spirit lives on.” —Caroline Kennedy, *TIME* magazine, 2007.

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What is rarely debated is its effectiveness in motivating individuals, even well after the speech was given. In fact, the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza, the museum that chronicles the assassination and legacy of President Kennedy, hosts a special exhibit *entitled* “Call to Action.”

**BREVITY/SIMPLICITY.** There are quotes throughout history emphasizing the benefit of brevity when speaking or presenting in public. From Roman statesman, scholar, and orator Marcus Cicero, who stated, “Brevity is the best recommendation in speech, whether in Senator or orator” to President Franklin D. Roosevelt who said “Be sincere; be brief; be seated,” brevity while speaking has been viewed as a virtue.

There is no better example of brevity winning not only the day, but the better part of the next 165 years, than President Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. There have been countless books written about this famous address. It has been studied by Presidents throughout history, and the first six words of this Address, “Four score and seven years ago” are ingrained in every elementary school child’s memory in America. Many facts surrounding the address have been debated. Two are not.

First, Abraham Lincoln was not the keynote speaker; Edward Everett, a sought after orator of the day, was. Edward Everett was considered one of the greatest orators of his time, and had been designated as the keynote speaker for the dedication of the Gettysburg monument. Second, Edward Everett’s speech was over 15,000 words long and lasted over two hours, while Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address was 246 words long and between two and four minutes.

Edward Everett instantly recognized the virtue of brevity, commenting to President Lincoln, “Mr. Lincoln, if I could have come as near striking the keynote of this occasion in three hours as you did in three minutes, I should be better satisfied with my performance.”

“*President Lincoln was able to deliver so much power in so few words because it was so brief.*”

Today, the Gettysburg Address is revered as one of the greatest speeches ever delivered. President Lincoln is often regarded as one of the greatest leaders in U.S. history, and Edward Everett’s name is barely known. Why? While it is not possible to study the cadence, tone, delivery, etc. of a speech given nearly 165 years ago, one thing that can be studied is the speech itself. President Lincoln was able to deliver so much power in so few words *because* it was so brief. There was no time for his message to get diluted, for his thoughts to twist and turn, and for his audience to lose their focus. The President was able to grab the attention of his audience immediately and hold it. No superfluous words, no unnecessary sentences, and no dilution of message. Brevity seized the day then, and brevity will seize the day now.

**CONVICTION (CHARACTER).** “He wasn’t a natural orator, not at all. His voice was raspy. A stammer and a lisp often marred many of his speeches. Nor was his appearance attractive... Short and fat, he was also stoop-shouldered” —from “Churchill: A Study in Oratory”

Add to that Churchill’s quick sarcasm and strong opinions, characteristics that were certainly not universally liked or accepted, and you begin to wonder how Sir Winston Churchill was able to persuade and influence so effectively?

Sir Winston Churchill used his conviction to will not only his nation, but the entire world to change course. The sheer will and conviction of Churchill, his words and his beliefs, may have been as beneficial to the British cause as the logic of his argument, the credibility of the speaker or his emotional appeal.

One can argue that the “We Shall Fight on the Beaches” speech was also a call to action, which it was. This speech can, and has, been studied and utilized to demonstrate how to give a speech, how to use repetition, and a host of other “how to” lessons. This speech offers something for everyone. What does it offer a leader today? Evidence of the power of conviction when speaking or presenting a message.

Listening to this speech one can feel the raw power, feeling, emotion and drive in Churchill's every word. Churchill had railed against the Nazi regime, often without an audience, long before it was in vogue to do so. When opinion turned, there was no questioning his conviction. It is hard to imagine a British citizen not being inspired upon hearing the final paragraph of this inspiring address:

“We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.”

His conviction never wavered, even when he was not in power, and this was evident in his communication to the British Empire's citizens, her allies and her enemies.

So what? What does this information mean to the leader of a company, whether it has 2 employees or 20,000? Or to a not-for-profit leader trying passionately to motivate or attract supporters? Or to a political candidate running for a local or federal office? Chances are, barring some unforeseen circumstance, the vast majority of leaders will never: a) have to communicate to as large an audience as a President or Prime Minister does; b) have the resources available that a world leader does; and c) have the ability to reach the masses through paid or earned media the way a world leader does. So how can a leader utilize the ABCs of communication effectively in light of the above?

**ACTION.** A speech or presentation given without a call to action is a speech or presentation not worth giving. I have come to the conclusion that if there is no desired action or re-action on the part of the speaker or presenter, there is very little reason to speak or present at all. The list of potential actions a speaker may desire is endless: support, opposition, motivation, dissuasion, encouragement, education, organization, ad infinitum.

In order to effectively utilize this principle, I believe the best course of action for a leader to take is to ask him or herself prior to developing a talk, presentation, speech, meeting outline or press conference to answer the following three questions, as they are fundamental in both determining the message and its effectiveness:

- 1. What do I want to accomplish?**
- 2. What is the desired result/What do you want the audience to do?**
- 3. Who cares/ Why should they care?**

These questions, with proper introspection and preparation, will lead the leader in terms of developing a message with a clear call to action.

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**BREVITY.** Once a basic message and call to action have been determined, the hard work of deciding exactly how to develop and deliver this message begins. Determining out what words to use, what phrases to use, how much detail to give, and how much information to provide are the logical next steps. Once you have figured out what you are trying to accomplish, you need to figure out how to accomplish it. And, in communication, there is no substitute for brevity.

In the vast majority of presentations, speeches, debates, announcements and press conferences, the one universal similarity is the tendency to include more information than is necessary to convey the message, which leads to message dilution, and often to the message getting lost completely. Look to advertisers, or more importantly, copywriters and newspaper editors, for excellent examples of how to use extreme brevity to attract attention: headlines. Newspaper and magazine headlines are created with one of two purposes in mind. Either (a) get the customer interested enough to purchase the publication or, if the publication has been purchased, (b) having the customer read the article following the headline.

While never as brief as a headline, a leader should utilize brevity in order to whet the palate of the audience, communicate a core message, and get the audience interested in and desiring more information—all leading to the generation of action. Leaders can use the cornerstone of brevity effectively by answering the two questions above, and then asking what information is absolutely necessary to elicit the desired action or reaction. The most effective way to do this is through

preparation and practice, and the effective “whittling down” of content until the core message and crucial information is all that is left. As famous French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery (and author of *The Little Prince*) said so eloquently and so accurately, “Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.” Every leader should think about his or her communication in the same light.

**CONVICTION.** The perfect call to action, with the perfect amount of information delivered in perfect fashion will fall flat if an audience does not believe that the speaker believes in what is being communicated. Of the three cornerstones, conviction is at its core both the simplest and the most difficult cornerstone to implement. And the simplicity and difficulty both stem from the same place—within the speaker. It is the simplest because it is either there or it is not. It is the most difficult because it cannot be learned or faked. A leader either strongly believes in his or her message, or he or she doesn’t. One thing every leader should realize: an audience can sense how much conviction is behind a message. So how can a leader effectively utilize conviction? Simply put, make absolutely certain that you believe in what you are about to say prior to saying it. No amount of practice and preparation will help a leader convey conviction if he or she simply does not fully believe in what he or she is communicating.

**AUDIENCE.** Again, most leaders will not have the opportunity to reach the masses in the way that a President or Prime Minister can. But that makes the utilization of the ABC's even more critical. While everything a President says and does is closely scrutinized, chances are that a President, if he or she has an off day or misspeaks, will have the opportunity to rebound and “message correct” in the future—the audience will still be there. There is a strong possibility that if a leader fails to connect and effectively communicate a message even once, the chance to reach that same audience may not come again. This makes it crucial to invest the time to clearly determine what your message is, be able to capture and communicate that message as simply and briefly as possible, and make sure that prior to communicating this message you feel and believe the message you are about to deliver.

You may not be able to reach the number of people that a President can, but the opportunity exists for a leader to spread their message well beyond the limitations that existed before. The barriers to sharing information are being torn down all around us, making it possible to reach not only those you know already, but those that may have an interest in your cause or company continents away. But there are so many voices out there clamoring to be heard, you may not get a second chance if you lose their attention. So you must master and follow the ABC's. They are the cornerstones and building blocks of all successful communication.

In an age when technology changes the ways in which we communicate each and every day, the alphabet still exists as the bedrock of the English language, the very foundation of our words, and the basics with which we formulate thoughts and opinions. The same holds true with regard to the ABC's of communication. No matter the technology, medium, venue, audience or audience size, there is simply no greater way to achieve communications success and effectively convey a message than following your ABC's. 📖

# Info

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | Matt Eventoff, owner of [Princeton Public Speaking](#), serves as a communication and messaging strategist for C-level executives in organizations ranging in size from startups to Fortune 100 firms, political leaders, nationally- recognized litigators, public figures and leaders from myriad other industries.

Matt's specialties include communication training, message development and training and communication strategy. He lectures on crisis communications, public speaking and interacting with the media at colleges and universities, and is frequently cited by leading publications and news outlets on issues related to communication.

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