

Communication: A lesson from Helene

by Keith Washington, contributing writer

On September 27th, 2024, those of us located in Western North Carolina witnessed and experienced the worst storm in recent history in this region! For hours, we heard the freight train-like whistling of the wind; and we saw the leaning of the trees that eventually gave way to the mighty, sustained push and pull of the winds. The rivers rose beyond their banks, which led to the massive flooding that captured the attention of the nation. I am confident that every meteorologist who tracked Hurricane Helene before her arrival was aware that this would be a major storm. In fact, all of the news outlets I watched tried to articulate the immensity of the storm. However, no one expected the impact that it would make on its path.

After experiencing what Helene did to our region, I had to conclude that something compromised in the transmission of information. Over a period of several days, the immense power of Helene, which the experts were analyzing and processing, did not fully translate in the messaging of what the general public should expect from Helene. This messaging element of communication was initiated and executed by the messenger, in this case, the meteorologists. In retrospect, it is clear to see that the **MESSAGING** was a weak link in this particular chain of communication.

Immediately following the storm, the national media outlets converged on our region to broadcast what had transpired. Unfortunately, we lost power and cellular service, so we could not see what the world was seeing regarding the aftermath of the storm in our area. Due to the devastation captured and aired, our relatives and friends from around the country were desperately trying to contact us with no success. Within this group of concerned family members

inquiring about our well-being was our daughter, who was three hours away on her college campus. It felt like time was standing still as my wife and I wondered if she was okay. Did she need anything? She must be worried beyond comprehension about our condition, given what she was seeing on television and online.

For three long days, she could not reach us, nor could we contact her. When the roads were cleared, we traveled approximately two hours in the direction of where our daughter lives until we could successfully get a call out to her. Due to the significance of the message we wanted to convey to her (e.g., we are okay), as well as the message we wanted to receive from her (e.g., that she was okay), we decided to drive to her campus to personally deliver and receive these messages. We determined that the message, and our we need to convey it, reached a critical point of importance to all of us, so making this drive became a **MUST!** It was truly all about the **MESSAGE**. Similar to the instance above, here was another link missing from the chain of communication — the inability to deliver the main element, the message.

Around three a.m. on the morning of the storm, our local meteorologist confirmed that high winds would be experienced for several hours in our area. I took this information and immediately moved our cars to an area of our driveway that was free of trees. This move proved to be prescient. Around six am, from our window, we watched two large trees from opposite ends of our yard fall exactly where our cars were just three hours earlier! Had we not moved our vehicles, not only would they have been destroyed, but we would have been trapped in our yard until a passageway was created. As the **RECEIVER** of this message from our local meteorologists, I was equipped with

the information needed to make a decision that mitigated the impact of the storm upon our family. Had I improperly consumed this information, the impact of the storm would have been even more severe.

From these three occurrences, I was reminded of the implication associated with **HOW** the messenger chooses to “message” his or her communication. The correlation is clear, and it can make the difference between one being prepared and responsive, vs one being unprepared and irresponsible. I was also reminded that the message itself can make the difference between one being calm and at peace, vs one being unsettled and in emotional turmoil. Furthermore, I learned that the timeliness of the message, and the credibility assigned to the messenger, can directly influence the decisions one makes with the information received.

So, what is communication and how does it impact our everyday lives professionally? Communication is defined as “the process of sending (e.g., messenger) and receiving (e.g., receiver) information (e.g., messages). It can be one-on-one or between groups of people, and can be face-to-face or through communication devices. The great leadership expert, John Maxwell says that 90% of the world’s problems can be traced back to poor listening/communication, as the root cause. This is a staggering statistic. In the sphere of our professional lives, we do not have to look too far to see the significant impact poor communication has on us all.

Over the past two years, we have seen multiple strikes by union organizations; we were introduced to the term “quiet quitting,” where employees have decided to do the bare minimum required by their job description, thereby refusing to put in any additional effort or enthusiasm, and essentially become less engaged; and we are active witnesses of corporations terminating Gen Zers at alarming rates. If anyone takes the time to analyze and study each of these issues, I am extremely confident the analysts

will find a breakdown in communication, somewhere along the communication process, as the culprit. At its core, one will find that the messenger has done a poor job of articulating the message; or they will find that the message was poorly devised or structured with insufficient consideration of all recipients; or they will find that the recipients of the message reached a false conclusion as they consumed the message or information conveyed. It is also highly possible that they will find the core issue to be a combination of all potential causes mentioned above.

Irrespective of where you find yourself on the chain of command, I would like to suggest a few points to consider as you work to improve or optimize your communication as a professional:

- As the **MESSENGER**, never assume that anyone has access to the information that is prompting your message or understands how you have processed that information. It is critical that you account for **EVERYONE** who will be consuming your message because you will have a range of consumers who are extremely removed from the details.

Similarly, you will have other consumers who may have similar access to the details as you do, as the messenger. These points must be contemplated as you craft **AND** deliver the message. As a leader, you must earn the respect and credibility of your audience not simply through your own view. Those under your leadership influence must see you this way. You must build trust-equity that makes your team comfortable coming to you to seek guidance and clarification, where needed. If you have closed this door that can further enhance your communication with your teams, there will be repercussions

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that will show itself at some point. These repercussions can percolate during an employee engagement survey, and/or in the form of resignations, quiet quitting, etc.

- The **MESSAGE** should be timely, fact-based, and relatable to all who will receive it. Keep in mind that if you expect anyone to listen to or read your message, then it should convey to everyone how the message impacts them and how they should respond to it. No one should have to stop what they are doing to consume your message, simply to go on an investigative quest to understand what you are sharing, take a class to understand how it impacts them, or attempt to read your mind to determine what you are expecting of them. The message presented should address all of these items, at a minimum. The message should be important enough to both parties — meaning the messenger and the receiver(s) — that you would be willing to drive three hours to share it.

- As the **RECIPIENT**, it is critical that you resist the temptation of “reading between the lines” of any message. Rather, take the time to seek clarification, if necessary. It is possible that the messenger is conveying exactly what the message is, nothing more nothing less. When the message is clearly crafted, communicated, and understood, it is incumbent upon you, as the receiver, to

act on it. When you learn that trees are likely to fall, it is now your responsibility to move your cars!

Everyone has been blessed with influence and the power to move others. Like money, this tool of influence is rooted in neutrality, where its good is contingent upon the one who holds it. It is my hope that everyone finds this power within themselves and is willing to take the necessary steps to build it. As a leader, or one who aspires to be a leader, there is no greater lever of influence that one can possess than his or her power to communicate. In fact, Daniel Webster fully understood and appreciated the power of this lever of influence and communication when he made the following statement: *“If all my talents and powers were to be taken from me by some inscrutable Providence, and I had my choice of keeping but one, I would unhesitatingly ask to be allowed to keep the power of speaking, for through it, I would quickly recover all the rest.”* **TE**



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