

KAS/SAIIA Alumni dinner 18 November 2014

Talk by Pieter Cronjé

When we need to build a bridge, we find a good engineer. When we need surgery we find a competent doctor. As we can all read, write and speak, what is so special about communication?

We should not overcomplicate it as we use it every day. We should also not underestimate it. It is a craft, a skill learnt over time and with practice. Good communicators can make it an art form.

It is how we declare love and war. It is how we share joy and anguish.

Communication is a leadership skill. Communication is too important to be left only to communicators.

There is a great deal of wisdom in the room tonight. You have expertise, experiences and insights I will never have. You must share your talents and knowledge through communication.

The Dean of the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Stellenbosch, prof. Christo Viljoen, had a tough way of teaching his engineering students how to communicate. When their final year practical projects had to be assessed, he asked a female, English-speaking language lecturer from the University of Cape Town to help with the assessment.

The minute the students used technical terms, she would simply say: "I do not understand".

She badgered them until they could explain the merit and value of their models in simple language.

Prof Viljoen said: "Engineers do not have to sell their expertise to fellow engineers. They have to convince decision-making bodies such as boards and city councils why they should be given the project. These bodies are made up of non-engineers: church ministers, social workers, business people, etc.

When you communicate you have to answer five basic questions: What? Where? When? Why? How? This will satisfy the initial information needs.

Then the listener would want to know: "How does it affect me? What do you want me to do? Where can I find more information or help?"

Always start with the objective of your communication: What do you want people to think and do when you have spoken to them?

You therefore have to do homework about your audience. Who are they? What do they know? What do they expect to hear? What questions, problems and objections could they have? This you have to prepare.

Also follow these golden rules: keep it simple (no jargon, buzzwords, acronyms), give the bigger picture (context) and repeat, repeat, repeat.

You have two ears and one mouth – use them in that ratio. Be interested, not interesting. Are you really listening or just thinking of your response? We have 24x7 global, mobile connectivity. You are not just transmitting data. You are communicating with a real, live fellow human being. Find the “People skills” key on your touch screen or keyboard!

When you have to communicate something important to many, have a communication plan:

- Objectives (what do you want to achieve?);
- target audiences (whom are you speaking to?);
- channels (which communication channels will your chosen target audience read, listen to or watch);
- key messages (the three or four messages you will repeat constantly, despite using different words);
- content (what is relevant, newsworthy, well-presented and valuable for the recipient?);
- timing (when do you communicate and when do you need to repeat.) Also cross-reference your various communication channels to strengthen and widen the impact of your message.

If you master these principles, you are ready for probably the toughest test in communication: you as the spokesperson on a live, television interview about a controversial topic, with a hostile presenter. (**See the Media Survival Kit – attached*)

If you can communicate well under those pressures, your ability to deliver persuasive presentations and speeches will improve.

International election experts warned that South Africa’s first democratic elections in 1994 would take one to two years to organise. It was accomplished, against all odds, in four months. Imperfect, but widely considered and accepted as the will of the South African people, these elections united South Africans while waiting in long queues to cast their votes.

It was seven times bigger than any previous election, almost 20 million people voted, half of them for the first time, there were 10 500 voting stations, a third without water or electricity, in deep rural hamlets and without today’s information and communications technology. Urban violence, sabotage, bloody clashes between political opponents, even armed invasions tested the Independent Electoral Commission, security forces and those who had crafted a peace deal. It simply **had** to be ratified in a general election and 27 April 1994 was cast in stone.

The IEC grew from one staff member, its chairman, Judge Johann Kriegler, in December 1993 to 350 000 election staff on voting days. A massive voter education drive saw 6 million manuals in 11 languages distributed countrywide to overcome illiteracy: voter turnout was 86% plus, there were less than 1% spoiled ballots. There was no e-mail, Internet, social media or cell phones. We used landlines and fax machines.

Some of “Dark hours” the IEC had to deal with included:

- Relocating from Kempton Park to downtown Johannesburg.
- Discovering that the list of voting stations prepared by Home Affairs was not valid (some venues were too small, no longer available, not in the right places).
- Being informed that there would be two instead of just one ballot (This doubled the logistics)
- A march by Inkatha on ANC headquarters, Shell House. ANC security guards opened fire, 19 marches were killed – one month before the election.
- Vote counters going on strike.
- NASREC counting centre (20% of the national vote) had still not begun counting three days after the election because of procedural difficulties.
- An official or officials in the counting centre who took votes from the ANC and allocated them to opposition parties.
- A last minute demand by the major political parties to the IEC to up their party’s votes because of alleged voting irregularities or face a court challenge.

Late one night, the chairperson, Judge Johann Kriegler and I left IEC headquarters to find a meal. He was accosted by a BBC television crew: “Judge, why is this election such a mess?”

His reply came instantly: “I must apologise to you for my failure to provide you with violence.” He walked off.

When the vote counting irregularities became known, Reuters called me from London: “Mr. Cronjé, we want to interview you about the hacking of the election results. We will record this interview and it’s only fair to warn you that what you are about to say, will affect the stock markets.” No pressure!

It’s like diving with sharks: don’t make any sudden movements, don’t show fear and don’t bleed!

Before the election, Judge Kriegler said: “This is an insurmountable opportunity.”

When the results were announced and peace, calm and acceptance prevailed, he said: “Maybe we were too stupid to realise this was impossible!”

His words will continue to inspire me.

If you understand how hard our democracy was won, you will value, cherish and nurture it. It is not to be toyed with. It is a life-long labour of commitment, dedication.....and love.

Democracy gave people a voice. Use it. You are a citizen in a democracy. Ask your public representatives about their promises and their duties. It is your right. And if you do not receive a response you can muster support.

Who thought the Berlin wall would ever fall? How did the Arab spring start? Who knew when apartheid would end?

The National Development Plan cannot remain just talk, strategy and vision. It must be implemented.

Government cannot do it alone. Government, business, civil society and other stakeholders need to work together.

Engage, create a “burning platform” to describe the need and urgency, offer scenarios and options for solutions. Government does not always have the time or the will to think creatively. Help them.

For a long time, economic development officers would draw up a list of projects to boost economic development to please their superiors. Often practical business people shot down the plans as they were impractical and did not meet business criteria.

In Saldanha, under a programme sponsored by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, the private sector is now leading a forum with politicians and government officials in attendance. Business identifies the investment and growth opportunities and projects and the role of government is to facilitate, approve or support those initiatives so that they materialise and benefit everyone.

Sometimes this engagement will be difficult. We have all had difficult conversations, awkward moments. One of the most liberating discoveries I made is that you do not have to mean and rude to have a frank and difficult conversation. Be yourself, speak with respect, focus on the outcome and be firm. Talk, and then wait for the response.

Joseph Grenny is an expert on “The Art of Crucial Conversations”. These conversations come about when there is disagreement, and when both the stakes and emotions are high. He says problems in organisations, business and personal lives are often the result of crucial conversation not being held or not being held well.

He was scoutmaster for a young boy who became a drug addict. He helped him to get two jobs. Grenny’s house was burgled twice and the second time he captured the young man on video

footage. When he found him on the street he took him home. He assured him of his caring and support and then showed him the video footage. Grenny told him he was going to hand it to the police.

The young man broke down, acknowledged that he had to go to prison, but pleaded with Joseph to help him when he was released. That is the power of a crucial conversation held well where someone goes to prison, yet still trusts the person who helped to send him there.

Chances for a successful crucial conversation are also increased when respect and common purpose are established.

Africa is a continent of stories. Narrative and stories are powerful tools in communication. Why do we remember childhood fairy tales, Biblical stories, stories of heroic deeds and achievements and life lessons from mentors so well? There is a beginning, a struggle or a series of unfolding events and an end with a lasting life lesson.

If we master the principles of communication and the art of appropriate and illustrative stories, personal or real experiences, we can move from sharing information, to persuasive (not manipulative!) communication. With practice, integrity, help and experience a persuasive communicator can become an inspiring leader.

Networking is mistakenly viewed as meeting and exchanging contact details for possible future use. Real networking between two people sharing information, advice, help, referrals and mutual value, is a powerful communication and business tool. My career was built on the principles of networking.

The 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa was a great success. Why?

- We had a powerful dream of hosting the biggest sport event in the world after years of isolation.
- The price of success was great: new infrastructure, services and a once in a lifetime global marketing opportunity.
- The price of failure was too ghastly to contemplate – FIFA taking the event away from South Africa.
- Politicians disagreed about many things, but cooperated on the World Cup.
- National, Provincial and local government followed the example and aligned their plans, budgets and will.
- This was a strong economic catalyst and the private sector followed government's lead and invested.
- South Africans felt proud and capable.

That recipe is not lost. It just needs leadership.

Please do not think of leaders as only those who are ministers, chief executives or leaders of political parties. We need leaders at every level.

Mother Teresa was never elected but touched the world, Oseola McCarthy was a Mississippi washerwoman who left school at an early age but saved \$150 000 for a bursary fund for black students. This inspired the private sector to follow suit. No one knew Wang Weilin until he stopped the tanks in Tiananmen Square holding his shopping bags.

There are many definitions of leadership. Some of the qualities I associate with leadership include the ability to laugh, cry, stand alone, share, teach, forgive and humility. Nelson Mandela was leadership personified.

Do not wait for a leader to come along. Nurture leadership where you see it. Be a leader yourself!

Humour is also a leadership quality! My friend John Lloyd asked Madiba for a picture during a visit to Independent Newspapers. Mr. Mandela feigned irritation. “Why?”

John’s response? “Because your grandchildren will never believe you met John Lloyd!” Madiba laughed and remembered John.

Author Uys Krige says you are allowed to brag about your modesty. Linguist Johan Combrinck says the older you get the more you become like yourself. Billy Connolly says: “Before you judge a man, walk a mile in his shoes. After that, who cares? He’s a mile away and you’ve got his shoes!”

Sometimes when we are concerned about events in our country, we refer to Alan Paton’s famous book: “Cry the beloved country.”

I invite and challenge you to start co-authoring a new book: “LEAD the beloved country!”

Media survival kit ©

Mindset

- You are the expert - It's part of your job, not a burden
- An interview enables you talk to thousands, even millions. How long will this take you otherwise?
- You are shaping the image of your organization

DO's

- Respond quickly, be available
- Know your facts and stick to them
- Use clear and simple language
- Stick to your area of responsibility and expertise
- Be courteous, professional. Do NOT get angry
- Clarify the deadline, angle of the story
- Keep commitments, meet deadlines
- Offer to review a draft, but the journalist is not obliged to supply it
- Correct factual errors only if the draft is sent to you – not the tone or style
- If the topic is controversial or technical, respond by e-mail
- Apologies, sincerity are in order
- In a crisis, stick to one spokesperson – tell the truth, tell it all, tell it fast

Do NOT

- attack “the media”, “journalists”, or this journalist
- guess or speculate
- give “off the record” comment
- panic
- complicate
- threaten
- be arrogant

Radio, Television

- What is the topic? Who is the audience?
- When? Where? How long?
- Is it live or recorded?
- Which programme? Who is the presenter/host?
- Who else is participating?
- Is this a telephonic or studio interview?
- Is this a phone-in, are you opening lines?
- What is the angle of the programme?
- Get all contact details – studio, producer
- Accept short deadlines, notice
- Learn the art of the “sound byte” (telling your story in a short elevator ride)
- Avoid technical jargon and buzzwords. Keep it short and simple
- Stay calm, focus, stay on message
- Stay informed, be available
- Answer the direct question first, then elaborate if necessary
- Talk to the presenter, not the listeners (except in a relaxed interview)