

## Ten Thematic Problems from the Dark Side

First, here are two unpleasant heuristics: 1. Leaders don't arrive as fully-formed communicators, and 2. They will not achieve perfection on this planet, at this time.

### 1. The problem of significance

The NT is clear that leadership and speaking are serious appointments. Paul writes (Ro.12:6a), "Leadership is a gift, varying in the *charismata* given to each" and "The leadership gift demands diligence" (Ro.12:8d), that is, "care and industry" (Henry, 1708-10). Peter adds, "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. [And] If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God" (1 Pe. 4:10,11. Emphasis mine).

Jaundiced contemporary culture misinterprets this final phrase, sensing encouragement to be arrogant, rather than to godly imitation or representation of the *imago Dei*. Today, it seems safer to put leaders in their place, rather than to trust them, but in so doing, we risk denuding the gift of its influence. The challenge is to balance accountability with authority, restriction with freedom.

### 2. The problem of complexity

Contemporary leaders' required repertoire of communication competencies is growing, and includes, "The ability to communicate at times of volatility" as well as to operate in "personal, internal, public, and virtual dimensions, with communication interaction across increasingly diverse, global stakeholders and settings" (Woodward and More, 2010). Leaders may well be aware of the sensitivities particular to their own sector or industry, but none can hope to master the gamut of theories, issues, practices and perspectives in play.

These first two problems give rise to:

### 3. The problem of pressure

...about which I will say no more here, except that it exacerbates problem four.

#### **4. The problem of nerves**

Though nobody enjoys them, in situations of threat or risk, nerves are a physical sign of being human and awake, so can be managed, and are less a worry than their absence.

#### **5. The problem of context**

Communication is always contextual. Skills needed for success in one setting, may not apply in another. Speech making and presenting skills don't all translate to media interviews. In the latter, the need to mount your main points quickly is paramount. Likewise, business-as-usual communication rules do not apply in a crisis, when urgency increases.<sup>1</sup>

#### **6. The problem of ethics**

I take it as given, until proven otherwise, that the executives I work with have working moral compasses: that is, at least the guidance of conscience or precept. Some make me wonder: they are ready to say whatever it takes to please a hearer or further a current aim, as long as they think they can get away with it. Cangemi and Pfohl allege that the proportion of CEOs who are psychopaths could be as high as four per cent (2009). Without instrument and diagnosis, who can say?

#### **7. The problem of organisational systems and culture**

Sometimes communication skills designed to free people, are lost in skirmishes with organisational systems and culture. For example, computer presentation slideware is a contemporary gorgon luring men and women to its glare before turning them to stone. Its relentlessly linear logic ravages communication and divides rather than focuses attention.

#### **8. The problem of time**

Who takes time to converse, question, read broadly, ruminate and prepare thoroughly? — though these offer eventual, lasting improvements. As Shahjahan contends, “In a culture of performativity, rapid communication, and mobility, slowing

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<sup>1</sup> This applies not only to media interviews, where, in the words my mentor, Mike Macnamara, “The two biggest killers of media interview success are terminal niceness and inexperience.” Journalists, will readily complain about a lack of transparency or skewing of information by spokespeople, yet are not averse to stitch ups, and other forms of taking advantage of the inexperienced.

down<sup>2</sup> seems to be the antithesis of what needs to happen” (Shahjahan, 2015). Why is *busy* the new black? And how can we forget that the dumbest mistakes ever made are when someone’s in a rush?

### **9. The problem of frequency**

Active politicians gain much on-the-job speaking practice and ought to become better performers, yet an alternate view, seen in Pr.10:19 proclaims, “The more you speak, the more your chances of getting it wrong.” Observation says both can be true.

### **10. The problem of engagement**

It is not uncommon for presenters to find their own content uninteresting, in which case, heaven help their audiences.

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<sup>2</sup> Shahjahan claims the Japanese/Chinese characters for the English word ‘busy’ also carries the meaning ‘soul is dead’ (he cites Mayuzumi, 2006, p. 14 [citation unchecked]).

## **Bibliography**

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