

# FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

## LEADERS UNDERSTAND THE POWER OF WORDS

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Words and phrases have the power to excite our spirits, to free our minds, and to help us envision innovative ideas. "I have a dream," "Four score and seven years ago," "A date which will live in infamy," and "We hold these truths to be self-evident" are phrases that need no explanation. We remember these phrases and we also remember who said them. We remember the speeches because the words had a powerful effect on us, but we also remember them because they were delivered with a deep passion. These words transformed our thinking about slavery, about segregation, about war, and about injustices. In short, leaders understand the power of words.

### Leaders Understand the Power of Words

When you listen to Martin Luther King Jr., or read how the great Shawnee Chief Tecumseh could mesmerize an audience, or if you listen to an actor reading Lincoln's second inaugural address, you begin to understand how powerful words communicate passions and beliefs.

John W Gardner, a former president of the Carnegie Corporation and former secretary of education under President Lyndon Johnson, wrote a series of position papers on leadership in the late 1980s. One of the papers, entitled "Leadership Development," focuses on critical skills leaders must possess. He wrote:

If one had to name a single, all-purpose instrument of leadership it would be communication ... but the plain truth is that most bright young people are poor speakers. (Gardner, 1987, pp. 13-14)

Leadership and effective speaking are linked. Yet, when was the last time you heard a challenging, exciting, and passionate presentation? When was the last time you saw an innovative PowerPoint presentation featuring photographs and

symbols that really communicated a fantastic idea? Unfortunately most presentations are poorly prepared to deliver the intended message.

Part of the problem may be traced to colleges that no longer require students to register for courses in public speaking. College students even avoid elective courses in public speaking because preparing a formal speech and then delivering it in front of their peers do not seem worth the effort. But if we expect future leaders to become better speakers, it will take more than merely registering for a three-credit course in public speaking. Students need to see faculty delivering interesting and challenging lectures. Students need to receive constructive feedback when they make an informal oral presentation to their peers. Students also need to be exposed to great speeches and to analyze their content for metaphors, rhythm, analogies, as well as the quality of the message. Students must learn how to create their own metaphors and stories and then use them in their own presentations.

What constitutes an effective speech? Tecumseh, Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Lincoln, and John F. Kennedy understood-and Toni Morrison understands-that effective speeches rely on powerful words, powerful ideas, content, and passion. They understood that powerful stories originate in the heart, they knew how to express their beliefs, and they knew how to weave their beliefs into stories.

Tecumseh, the great Shawnee chief, understood the power of using metaphors, stories, and passion when he spoke. Tecumseh had no formal education: He could not write, he could not read, he never took a college course in public speaking, and he had no need for a Power Point projector. In spite of his lack of formal education, Tecumseh, through his informal education, was able to develop his speaking skills at a very young age. He acquired these skills by listening to the older chiefs and observing how they debated issues of war and peace. He sat in council meetings and listened to the village elders debate tribal policy and observed the way they crafted words into logical arguments. He learned how to disagree without degrading or demeaning a fellow warrior, and he learned how to present his arguments with eloquence. His oratory skills were also developed around campfires listening to expert storytellers paint verbal pictures of the legends, myths, and history of the tribe. John Sugden, author of *Tecumseh* (1998), quotes a settler's reflections on Tecumseh's speaking ability:

When Tecumseh rose to speak, as he cast his gaze over the vast multitude ... he appeared one of the most dignified men I ever beheld. While this orator of nature was speaking the vast crowd preserved the most profound silence. From the confident manner he spoke of the intention of the Indians to adhere to the treaty and live in peace and friendship with their white brethren, he dispelled as if by magic the apprehension of the whites. The settlers immediately returned to their farms, and the active hum of business was resumed in every direction. (Sugden, 1998, p. 7)

Another great American, Martin Luther King Jr., transformed the nation's attitudes about segregation through both speech and action. Dr. King's powerful words, delivered with passion, helped Blacks and Whites to envision a nation's rebirth of freedom. His "I have a dream" speech will live forever in history and today is translated into more than 15 languages that can be heard and viewed by people throughout the world thanks to computer technology. Dr. King's speeches are powerful because he spoke passionately about his beliefs and then followed up with commitment.

Most Americans have read or listened to many historical presidential speeches. For example, President John F. Kennedy's famous "Moon Landing" speech delivered to a joint session of Congress, in which he clearly articulated his advocacy of sending a man to the Moon. In part, Kennedy said, "I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth." Kennedy's speech illustrates how a mere 31 words transformed the space program and dramatically promoted a huge transformation in computer technology. His speech contains two important leadership concepts: (1) he articulated his belief and (2) he provided the money to make it happen. Kennedy knew that great ideas are rarely implemented without an allocation of funds.

Most Americans are familiar with some of Abraham Lincoln's speeches. Most elementary students have read the Gettysburg Address, and many high school students have studied the constitutional issues presented in Lincoln's inaugural addresses. Probably few students are aware of Lincoln's address at Cooper Union in New York City. This address, according to several historians, moved Lincoln from a third-place presidential contender to the candidate nominated for president in 1860. The Cooper Union speech clearly illustrates how

Lincoln meticulously crafted his arguments outlining the constitutional precedents that permitted slavery to continue in the South while also explaining the constitutional precedents for not extending slavery into the newly formed U.S. territories. After leaving New York, Lincoln continued his campaign for the Republican presidential nomination by speaking in several New England cities. Lincoln clarified his position regarding slavery by creating a metaphor:

If I saw a venomous snake crawling in the road, any man would say I might seize the nearest stick and kill it; but if I found that snake in bed with my children, that would be another question. I might hurt the children more than the snake, and it might bite them ... But if there was a bed newly made up, to which the children were to be taken, and it was proposed to take a batch of young snakes and put them there with them, I take it no man would say there was any question how I ought to decide? The new Territories are the newly made bed to which our children are to go, and it lies with the nation to say whether they shall have snakes mixed up with them or not. (Goodwin, 2005, p. 233)

Another president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, also understood the power of words. Of the many speeches he made as president, his opening remarks to Congress declaring war on Japan are still remembered because of his use of just one word: *infamy*. Roosevelt's famous opening was "Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan." Roosevelt's original speech read, "a date which will live in history," and before delivery, Roosevelt crossed out the word *history* and penciled in *infamy*. The word *infamy* forever lives in history.

In 1993, Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize in literature. Her Nobel Lecture on December 8, 1993, in Stockholm, Sweden, began with a *story*: "Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind but wise." She *tells* the audience that she has heard the story told many ways, but she remembers that the *old* woman was a daughter of a slave and that she lived at the far end of a small village. The old woman's "reputation for wisdom is without peer and without question" (Morrison, 1993). One day some children enter her home and try to test her reputation for being wise and they say to the woman: "Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. *Tell* me whether it is

living or dead." The old woman does not answer their question and they repeat it. The woman remains quiet for a long time and finally speaks: "I don't know, she says. I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands" (Morrison, 1993). Morrison's story is about the power of words and the people who create and use words. Her speech focuses on a story about a wise woman, and the story she tells skillfully carries the message of her speech.

Leaders skillfully craft words and phrases into great stories. Leaders understand that speeches are not driven by a formula but by conviction. Leaders understand that public speaking is much more than a three-credit course or a two day workshop. Leaders are great speakers because they know how to communicate their stories; they are committed, dedicated, inspired, and passionate. Leaders understand that their stories, when implemented, make a difference.

## References

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