

## **Equipping Leaders: Communications 101**

*By Karen Campbell*

While preparing for a communications workshop one day, I found that I could summarize all of my specialized education and experience into four simple statements. Deciding not to linger on whether this meant I'd been trained well or had vastly overpaid on my education, I created what's now become my version of Communications 101:

1. Know yourself.
2. Know your audience.
3. Know your message.
4. Know your channels.

### **Know Yourself**

Many "professional communicators" (that means pastors, teachers, and business leaders, etc.) understand that in order to effectively communicate the sender has to ensure that the receiver has sufficiently heard and can restate the message. However, that same group of professionals often hit a snag on one major assumption: "Everyone else is just like me."

For instance, a pastor who learns best by hearing believes if he has said something from the pulpit, surely the congregation now understands. A teacher who "gets it" when she "sees it" may be expecting her pupils to move to the next level of learning because they have read something. A business owner who is all about hands-on learning shows an employee how to work a piece of equipment so the training is over.

Right?

Well, not exactly!

Learning styles differ. Howard Gardner, an educational scholar, refers to at least seven "multiple intelligences" in his *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* -- linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal. While we may be able to successfully maneuver within any of these, we have our preferences.

What makes "knowing yourself" even more complex is that learning preference is just one aspect of communication. Patty Lane, an intercultural strategist who has spent more than two decades studying how to effectively cross cultures, suggests that what makes each individual unique includes: [social/economic/educational experience, birth order, personality type and temperament, learning style, phase of life, generational concerns, gender, culture/worldview, and spiritual development.](#)

That's quite a bit of "luggage" each of us carries. While some may view it as excess baggage, I value exploring what we've accumulated to date. I also believe in purging when necessary.

When leading teams to address this first concern of communication, I often suggest that each team member create a mindmap that illustrates some of the aspects that Lane describes. A mindmap is a simple visual utilizing words, pictures, and colors placed randomly on paper as the memory or idea is brought to mind. Mindmaps are

not in order or even about order but are good tools for prompting thinking “outside the box.”

To create this particular mindmap, I offer up Lane’s categories and then ask each participant to begin by writing his/her name in the center of a piece of paper or poster. Afterwards, I lead them to consider a picture or word that would best summarize their experiences growing up, their position in the family of their birth, personality, etc. The combination reflection/art project usually takes at least 30 minutes.

When the mindmaps are complete, I encourage each team member to interpret their mindmaps for the other team members.

### **Know Your Audience**

The reason for team members to share their mindmaps lies in the second point of my communication summary. Whatever serves to make you who you are is also at work within the lives of your audience but every change changes everything. For instance, birth order may have affected me because I’m the youngest and accustomed to lots of attention. But the person I’m speaking with may be a first born and has a completely different perspective.

Knowing as much as we can about the audience with whom we are trying to communicate is critical.

So assumptions can’t work. Assuming that my years as a good little Southern Baptist in a small town Tennessee provides me with the same perspective as a man who knows the streets of Houston inside and out and is an introvert twice my age is just plain wrong. Unfortunately, when the differences aren’t that obvious, we return to the velvet rut of thinking that everyone thinks/acts/is “just like me.”

Knowing that you need to know your audience is not that big a leap for those of you who have spent some time communicating messages of all types. If you already embrace that concept, then How? becomes the big question.

And “question” is a key term. Our best example of an effective communicator – Jesus Christ -- asked questions more than any form of communication he used.

Groups that are working together (deacon bodies, church staffs, committees or teams) might want to expand on the mindmap exercise described earlier. The resulting “mindmaps” can be used as a basis for introductions and the springboard for other team-building exercises.

To enhance the experience, questions should be encouraged. One team posted the mindmaps around the room during a multi-day retreat and “prayerwalked” the room each morning, stopping when they did not understand a word or symbol and asking questions of the creator in order to understand and pray for that person.

One-on-one, we can simply follow Christ’s model and ask. The key, of course, is that when Jesus asked he also listened. And listening requires resisting the temptation to formulate your next statement while the other is talking.

### **Know Your Message**

Amazingly, knowing your message can be a bit trickier than you think as well. For instance, a business owner might say that his message is “customer service is key” but when it comes to service over profit, will that message still be true?

Those who feel rather evangelical about our message of the Good News of Jesus Christ might find it interesting to hear the stories of missionaries on international fields who have had to examine closely what they are saying in order to truly be heard. For instance, in the story of the *Peace Child*, Don Richardson recounts his experiences among a tribal people who valued the “art of treachery” and so after learning the tribe’s language and preparing the stories of his Lord and Savior, Richardson was shocked to discover that the “hero” from his audience’s perspective was Judas.

Richardson was shocked and ready to leave the area, feeling that he had no connecting point with his audience. Then they told him the story of the peace child – an ancient narrative that said peace must be honored among the tribes as long as the peace child lives. This child was the child of one tribe given over for safekeeping to the other tribe. Richardson immediately realized that his message was simple -- Jesus is the “peace child” for all of us.

Locking into word formulas or scripts to convey our message can be detrimental. Knowing the essence of what you are trying to convey will help you be prepared to shape those words for the audience in their context.

Just as a missionary must learn the language of the people they hope to reach, so must the believer who speaks the exact language of his/her audience know that audience’s context and culture. If a person has never experienced “grace” that word may have no meaning. But “peace” may indeed be the exact message they will grasp and take to heart.

### **Know Your Channels**

Channels or methodologies must meet the needs of the audience without changing the message. Note that I didn’t say the words of the message, because there are times other words are needed. But the idea of what you are trying to convey may take on a variety of forms in order for the audience to truly “hear”.

Sally Hinzie, a UBA consultant, has practiced these communication principles as a trainer of Sunday School workers and now internationally as a virtual strategy coordinator in Russia. Hinzie knows how to adapt methods to the needs of her audience. Learning early on that to reach a preschooler, one must get to eye level and provide a variety of experiences for these ever-exploring young minds, she now practices that same adaptability with chronological bible storying.

Storying is a channel to address the needs of an oral audience. Educated Westerners, for the most part, are accustomed to linear thinking and require outlines and rationale to back up our arguments for or against a topic. Those who grew up in oral cultures where stories are key and who can often retell a biblical account word for word after only hearing it once, require narratives, chants, poems, repetition to understand the message.

Hinzie is trained to identify biblical stories that best fit her audience’s worldview and then recount these stories without benefit of notes in a chronological fashion that

underscores the message. She is available for training mission groups and church staffs.

When churches began to utilize contemporary worship practices such as image projection and new forms of music, they were adapting their channels to reach a changing audience with the eternal message of God's love for us. As audiences continue to change, more adaptations of practice will definitely be in order.

**In summary ...**

Adapt the channel to reach the audience so that the message can be conveyed – if you know yourself well enough, you can become an effective communicator.

*Karen Campbell will explore multiple intelligences further in an August 14 workshop at UBA. Sally Hinzie is available to offer overviews and examples of orality for UBA churches. Tom Billings and Margaret Slusher will address Strategic Communications Skills August 27-29. For more information, call 713-957-2000 or visit [www.ubahouston.org](http://www.ubahouston.org).*