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THE MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

14 September 1955

CONTENTS

Page

INTRODUCTION--Captain B. C. McCaffree, USN, Vice Deputy Commandant, ICAF.....1

SPEAKER--Mr. Elmer L. Lindseth, President, The Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company.....1

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Mr. Elmer L. Lindseth, President of the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company was born in Chicago, Illinois, 12 February 1902. He received the following degrees: A.B., Miami University, 1923; B.S., Case Institute of Technology, 1925; M.S., Yale University, 1926; D. Eng. (hon), Case Institute of Technology, 1946; S. Sc.(hon), Miami University, 1951; D. Eng. (hon), Fenn College, 1952. He became associated with The Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company as a test helper in 1924, advancing to president in 1954. He is a director of the National City Bank of Cleveland; the B. F. Goodrich Company; and the Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States. He has been active in various civil organizations throughout his career, is a director of the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce and is associated with nine other Cleveland civic organizations at the present time. He is a Fellow of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers; a member of the executive committee of the Association of Edison Illuminating Companies; a director of the Edison Electric Institute; and a member of the National Industrial Conference Board. This is his first lecture at the Industrial College.

THE MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

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CAPTAIN McCAFFREE: I like to think that what is taking place this week is a jig saw puzzle. Our first lecture was about the Role of the Executive, and it resembled the picture on the box. Yesterday's lecture resembled the pieces as you dump them out, each of them representing a foible of human relationship and human behavior, and all are odd pieces.

Today we hear about the essentials of fitting those pieces together in order to make a nice dovetail pattern. These essentials deal with communications and how they apply to the field of human endeavor. When we consider that about sixty percent of an executive's time is taken up with the problem of communications in one way or another, the timeliness of this speech today is very apparent.

Our speaker is Mr. Elmer L. Lindseth, President of The Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company. You have already read his biography and realize the wealth of experience that he brings to this platform. Mr. Lindseth, it is my pleasure to introduce you to this year's student body, and we look forward to your remarks.

Mr. Lindseth.

MR. LINDSETH: Thank you, Captain. Gentlemen: Naturally, I am glad to be here. It is a privilege for me as one of the people at home, who too often don't understand the complexities of this field in which you are working, to come down here and get a first-hand look at it.

On the subject of my talk, which the Captain has stated as "Communications and How They Fit into Human Behavior," I don't think I ought to apologize. The books say it is very poor form to apologize at the beginning of a speech, so I will use as my way of explaining this situation another situation I was confronted with many years ago.

I went to a small college down in southern Ohio where we had a course called "Theology I." "Theology I" was an extremely popular course. Among other reasons for its popularity, it had been taught

by a venerable old professor, the same professor, for forty years. Among his many lovable traits was that for forty years he had asked only a single question on the examination, and it had been the same question for forty years: I wouldn't call it a "gut" course, but it was popular and we took it.

"Will the class please discuss the travels and preachings of the Apostle Paul?" Needless to say, we went to the examination pretty expert on the travels and preachings of the Apostle Paul. When we got there that morning, the professor greeted us with his usual cordial smile. He said, "In keeping with the custom of many years, the examination will consist of a single question." He turned to the board wrote the question, asking us would we please criticise the Sermon on the Mount.

We were not experts on the Sermon on the Mount, and it didn't take us long to turn the examination papers back. In five minutes the room was empty, except for Joe, who was still sitting there writing diligently. We waited for him in the hall, and we asked him, "What the devil were you writing about?" He said, "I just simply told him I will leave it to others to criticize the Master, and today I will discuss the travels and preachings of the Apostle Paul."

So with your permission I will leave the Captain's subject of "Communications" in the plural until another day, and I will proceed with the notes I have prepared for today's lecture--"Communication" in the singular.

This human relations subject is, of course, pretty important. It often sounds like a lot of blue sky and malarkey. But think for a moment about, say, the Westinghouse strike. Here is no problem in industrial procurement or automation or mechanization: this is 100 percent a problem in human relations. I only know what I read in the papers about this strike, but it is pretty obvious that there is a very serious breakdown in communication when people in Philadelphia or Cleveland or Kansas City will go out on strike because the Westinghouse Company is making an attempt to evaluate production and performance in a small and relatively unimportant portion of their operations in East Pittsburgh.

Although we may have experts in automation, in engineering and in production design, their work can be completely offset by a break down in human relations and communication.

It is for that reason I was gratified to note that the scope and purpose of the particular program on which you people are presently embarked emphasizes the application of principles of enlightened human relations to the executive task. That's pretty flowery language but the purpose is to assist in developing the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and understanding which contribute to the effectiveness in managing people.

Today we are going to talk about communication--communication in the singular, not the plural--particularly in the military sense. Communications--plural--suggest a complex and widespread system of gimmicks--dispatches, radio, circuits, sound-powered telephones, blinker lights, speedletters and myriad gadgets. In American business we have the counterparts--interoffice memos, newsletters, employee magazines, meetings, daily, weekly, monthly, and annual reports. We are just as buried in paper work as you are. We have just as much red tape, and just as much trouble.

But I am sure that all of us here have realized long ago that there is a great deal more to "communication" than the " communications" methods it employs. It is communication in this more basic, philosophical sense which I would like to discuss this morning along with some of the major problems involved in transmitting ideas from one individual to another with some prospect of achieving understanding.

We all communicate, adequately or inadequately and with some degree of efficiency, good or bad, throughout the working day. The Captain mentioned, for example, that sixty percent of an executive's time is devoted to communications of one form or another. So there should certainly be little question about the importance of communication.

And let there be no question about the extent of interest in the subject and its problems. Discussions on communication at meetings like this are frequent. There's a vast amount of literature on communication. A great deal of research is going on in the field.

Scientists have demonstrated that all the information communicated by a man in his lifetime, if properly and efficiently encoded, could be transmitted over a modern television channel in 10 seconds. Engineers have reduced the communication process to equations, graphs, and diagrams. Psychologists also have worked hard at communication.

But, although communication may be said to be commonplace, and the study of it is widespread, it is not simple--far from it. In fact, it is so difficult that Professor Roethlisberger of Harvard has said: "In thinking about the many barriers to personal communication, particularly those that are due to differences of background, experience, and motivation, it seems to me extraordinary that any two persons can ever understand each other."

So in communication we find an interesting paradox . Here is a vital process, one to which each of us must devote a very large part of his productive time, yet apparently one which remains tremendously difficult for even the most experienced--and you people are experienced at it. The military certainly must not get its communication fouled up; at least not in theory. And yet you people have spent a lifetime at it, and here I am talking about it.

I think the tables might be a little bit reversed. I am in somewhat the situation my mother-in-law found herself in the other day. She had been very much concerned that my wife had failed to talk frankly and adequately with my 12-year-old daughter about the facts of life. Grandma was over babysitting one day while my wife was out and Grandma said to my young daughter: "Martha Lou, I would like to talk about the facts of life." Martha Lou said, "All right, Grandma, just what would you like to know?"

So I suppose when I am up here talking to you about communication, you are likely to say, "All right, Elmer, just what would you like to know?"

You are all familiar with the many techniques I have mentioned. You know all about conferences, seminars, breakfast meetings, luncheon meetings, dinner meetings, reviews, critiques, resumes, and all the other devices of oral communication. You know all about policy manuals, bulletins, newsletters, pamphlets, graphs, charts, visual aids, and all the hundred-and-one means of written communication.

The literature on communications is full of rules. Dr. Rudolf Flesch's recommendations for easily readable communication boil down to a few simple precepts:

1. Avoid long sentences.

2. Avoid the abstract word, the legalistic word, and the two-dollar word.

3. Shorten sentences to an average of 17 words.

4. Shorten words to an average of 150 syllables per 100 words.

5. Use about 6 personal references per 100 words.

Dr. Robert Shurter of Case Institute of Technology has also suggested five rules for use at our Company, where he's been trying to teach us how to write a letter that someone else can understand:

1. Fix the responsibility for clarity firmly on the writer.

2. Remember the reader--avoid jargon and the vocabulary of the specialist.

3. Let it be known that you are not impressed by length.

4. Have each document begin with a concise statement of what it is about.

5. Let those who report to you know how you want the reported information organized.

There are many other sets of "simple" rules. Yes, it looks easy; but there is something basically wrong here.

If communication is so easy, why are so many people in all types of organizations--business, military, government--so uninformed? Why are top executives in industry and the military so isolated and so insulated? Why, in our system of delegation, do delegatees make decisions and take actions without the knowledge of people who ought to participate in them? Why do situations sneak up on the delegator which he "thought" were taken care of? In short, why does our ideal of delegation and control so often get so fouled up?

The unhappy conclusion keeps popping up that the basic communication problem is not entirely one of technique. There seems to be more to it than that. Soon we find that for the effective application of the techniques of communication, we must have what is variously described as a proper "climate," or proper " conditions"--a proper "atmosphere" and the proper "attitudes" on the part of those engaged in communication.

These conditions precedent to the establishment of good communication are not to be taken for granted. They are, in fact, rarely present and not easily achieved. So let's examine these aspects of communication, which for want of a better term, we can regard as comprising the philosophy of communication.

Now it begins to become clearer why, when communication is so universally necessary, when we have this great body of literature on the subject, when we have all these simple techniques, it is still so difficult to communicate effectively.

Probably the main reason is this: Communication is a human function, conducted by and between human beings, and no two human beings are alike. John M. McCaffery, President of the International Harvester Company, put it this way in Fortune Magazine a couple of months ago: "The biggest problem with industry is that it is full of human beings." They're the problem in communication as well.

The language used in discussing communication is replete with negatives: the "difficulties" of communication, the "blocks," the "obstacles," the " barriers." My kids say to me: "Dad, you have snow on your mental screen." "Noise" is a word with special semantic meaning in communication. Let's look at these barriers--at least, let's list them.

Barrier No. 1 to good communication, it seems to me, is the lack of proper climate of confidence and mutual understanding. People in management have different backgrounds, different objectives, different ambitions, and different motivations. This makes for a tremendous variation in perspective among members of the management group. Each executive deals with communication in a different context; each evaluates any situation which requires communication between him and others with a purely personal frame of reference.

In practice, this variation in perspective is frequently complicated by the absence of a sense of common purpose in the management group. People whose goals, as well as backgrounds, are different are not united. They are working to achieve a common purpose, yet they are communicating at cross-purposes. All too frequently they think they are talking about one thing, when in fact they are talking about two entirely different things.

On the matter of communicating without a common frame of reference, let's try a little experiment. I think this one came from M.I.T. I will

describe a simple situation. It is clear to me. Let's see what it means to you.

A man is walking along. He looks down at his suit and sees a hole in it. In a minute he is dead.

What picture comes to your mind? What did I communicate to you? If I led you to the conclusion that the man was walking along a street, that the hole was a bullet-hole, and that he died of the wound, you have reached the conclusion that the vast majority of people would reach. You are normal. But your conclusion is not what I intended at all. The facts are these: The man was a deep-sea diver; he was walking on the ocean bottom; the hole was in his diving suit; he drowned.

Each of us translated this little story in terms of his own frame of reference. It is easy to see how different the results can be. I communicated the information in one context, you received it in another, and certainly we failed to achieve effective communication.

Another important aspect of this first barrier is prestige and its companion, fear. The chief, the "old man," whoever the figure may be behind the traditional open door, receives upward communication which has been filtered and conditioned by the prestige he bears. Who likes to bring bad news to the chief?

This factor operates at every level. Much voluntary communication is suppressed because of subordinate reaction to fear. This accounts for many of those good ideas which died at the boss's threshold. Fear of disapproval--an unwanted sentry--effectively closes the open door.

So the first requirement of effective communication is a climate of confidence and mutual understanding.

Barrier No. 2 is the lack of motivation to communicate--the lack of desire. This particular obstacle arises often where there is no sound tradition of good communication.

One who is himself the victim of poor communication will, in the first place, not have too much material to communicate. Secondly, he is not stimulated by precept and example to attempt to communicate efficiently. Thirdly, he is often insecure. Imperfect knowledge of the situation, combined with lack of confidence or security, tends to make him draw in his horns and play it close to the vest. The less he communicates, the fewer mistakes he can make, or at least be charged with; the less they can hang on him. He is the familiar guy who won't stick his neck out.

This lack of the will or desire to communicate is usually due to lack of motivation, and is bound up with the previous obstacle, absence of the proper climate of confidence. Without this necessary climate, the will to communicate rarely exists; but the reverse is not true. Mere creation of the proper communication climate will not guarantee creation of the desire to communicate. But it is a prerequisite.

An example of this is found in the report of a management firm which had been requested to install a personnel department in a company which had existed without one for many years. In studying the firm, the consultants found that the president had isolated himself both physically and communicatively from the rest of the organization. His example provided no motivation to communicate. After study, the consultants concluded that their real job was not to set up a personnel department, which would have had to operate in a vacuum, but to establish a sound communication pattern in the client company.

So the second requirement is to create among our people the desire, the will, to communicate.

Barrier No. 3 I list as the failure to realize the emotional and psychological nature of communication--the mistaken assumption that communication is something essentially logical. It may not be logical at all. It may be basically the communication of the emotional reaction of one man to another, with no relationship whatever to logic.

Take the case of a hunch--or what higher echelons call executive intuition. Many decisions are made on this sort of basis. But the hunch itself, or the intuition, is not a logical thing, and is almost impossible to communicate or explain with any degree of accuracy or efficiency.

It is a false assumption that words in themselves, apart from the people involved, have meaning. Words are mere symbols that mean one thing in one situation and something else in another, or one thing when used by one man and something quite different when used by another. From time to time we find ourselves in the plight of the furniture dealer who had a delinquent account of long standing.

After he tried several approaches to this tough collection situation, he decided to appeal to the pride of his customer. "What will your neighbors think," he wrote, "when our truck backs up to your house and we repossess your furniture?" There was a delay of several days

before he got his answer. It said: "I have asked my neighbors, and they all think it would be a lousy, low-down trick."

So the third requirement is to realize how tough and tricky this communication job is.

Barrier No. 4 is the failure to listen intelligently. Often we listen with our ears, but not with our minds. We hear words, but not meaning.

Isolated as we are, each with his unique frame of reference, we make judgments and evaluations when communication is thrust upon us. What we do is not to listen intelligently. We do not try to put ourselves in the other fellow's place, to see the subject as he sees it, and consequently to understand what it means to him and what he is trying to say to us.

So the fourth requirement is that we must listen with our minds as well as with our ears.

Barrier No. 5 is a corollary to the previous one: our failure to measure the effectiveness of our communication, to determine what is getting through. The engineers refer to this as a lack of "feed-back."

We communicate, or we believe that we communicate--but without measurement, without feed-back, we have no means of evaluating the efficiency of our communication. We sit back, believing that we have communicated well. Better feed-back would shatter this complacency and expose our inadequacy. We might even be stimulated to try again; to try for really good communication.

We often hear it said that communication is a two-way street. Professor Alex Bavelas of M.I.T. demonstrated the principle and its importance by placing two people in separate rooms.

The first was given a telephone by which he could transmit messages to the second, who could listen but had no way of talking back. The sender was then given a blank piece of paper with several small blocks placed on it in random fashion. The listener was given a similar piece of paper and the same number of blocks. The object of the experiment was to have the listener arrange the blocks on his paper in the same pattern as the talker's.

The talker was free to describe the locations of the blocks in any way he wished. Such as the number of inches from the border, and so forth. But the communication was one-way only. In not a single case, among the many samples tested, was the listener successful in getting all the blocks properly placed on the piece of paper.

A one-way communication system such as this has little chance of succeeding--no feed-back.

The college Professor, who has been working at this problem a long time, has a highly developed system of feed-back. During the week he lectures, he communicates. But come Friday, he measures the efficiency of his communication through a quiz. Here is the feed-back which shatters his blissful complacency and stimulates him to try again--to try to communicate the same simple facts to the same simple minds. There is a lesson here for all of us.

The fifth requirement for successful communication then, is to find out how much of what we are saying is getting through to the listener.

We now come to a group of barriers which presuppose at least an organized attempt to communicate, and perhaps some success.

The first of these, Barrier No. 6, is the failure to emphasize and encourage the three-way nature of communication. Often we hear that communication must be from the top down and from the bottom up. Both are vital. No less important, as many have pointed out, is lateral communication--the interchange of information and ideas, not from one echelon of authority to another, but horizontally through each echelon.

Without effective communication downward, policies, philosophies, orders, and information cannot be brought to the action level at the proper time and in the proper form. Top management decisions stagnate at the top, and all those on lower echelons remain in isolation.

Conversely, without good upward communication, insufficient information reaches the level of policy decision. This produces Executive Isolation--the "ivory-tower" effect--and leads to the fatal process of making decisions in a vacuum.

Without voluntary lateral communication, there is no coordination or integration of the efforts of every manager in the organization. Only through effective lateral communication can all elements coordinate their efforts.

Differences frankly exposed, in a process which Mary Parker Follett called "construction conflict," are a healthy sign. This process must take place at every level. Too infrequently do we find it.

The military years ago was subject to much criticism for insisting that communications be kept in channels and travel up one side, over, and down the other. Fortunately for the military and its objectives, I understand that process has been much altered.

Let me quote from Peter Drucker:

> "The mass-production technology demands an integration of the individual operation into a unified whole. It is this whole, the team, the pattern, the organization, which produces in the modern industrial system. This 'whole' does not exist in the individual operations themselves. . . . The very strength and functioning of the enterprise may well depend on the attainment of a 'managerial attitude' by the middle groups. These groups are the organization itself, the nerve and circulatory system of the enterprise.
>
> "Unlike their ancestor the skilled artisan, supervision, middle management and technicians need no skill in the handling of tools or of materials. Their 'skill' is the ability to integrate. They have to fit the work of their department into the work of the whole, and to project the whole into their own work. Top management can set the pattern, but middle management and supervision must live it."

So the sixth requirement, if we would have good communication in our outfit, is to encourage horizontal as well as vertical communication.

Barrier No. 7 often exists even within a well-thoughtout communication structure: failure to use the most expedious communication channels. This stems from the old conflict of channels of contact and channels of authority.

The formal pattern of communication usually follows the organizational pattern of the business, and thus flows through channels of authority. Far more necessary, however, is an effective informal pattern of communication which flows through channels of contact, through which the man who needs a piece of information gets it directly from the man who has it. The difference between the two is the difference between

getting things done the easy way and getting them done the hard way--if at all.

Since these two sets of channels are normally entirely different, some people sense conflict in their simultaneous existence. Some people feel that communications outside the formal channels of authority leads to a loss of control. This is the viewpoint of the typical poor communicator and the insecure.

The General Electric organization chart includes this footnote, which I quote:

> "Channels of Contact. While the organization structure and chart define lines of responsibility, authority, and accountability, they do not indicate or limit Channels of Contact, or Flow of Information, between or among members of the organization. Organization policy permits and expects the exercise of common sense and good judgment, at all organization levels, in determining the best channels of contact for expeditious handling of Company work. Contacts, and flow of information, between people and components of the organization should be carried out in the simplest and most direct way practicable. . . ."

A lot of thought and experience went into that footnote. It is worth the serious consideration of all of us.

So the seventh requirement is to avoid getting bogged down in channels.

Barrier No. 8 is the failure to apply successful known communication techniques. There is not much excuse for this. It is almost the case of the farmer resisting change--not buying something that will improve his methods because he does not farm now half as well as he knows how to.

We have referred to the great amount of study and research that has been done on communication. There are tried and tested techniques for almost any situation, and they fit the needs of virtually any organization. It is our responsibility to select the proper techniques for our own particular circumstances, and to see that they work. This is not easy, but it is essential.

Part of the trouble is the failure to provide regular and routine mechanisms to expedite the flow of communication. Staff meetings,

performance analysis meetings, supervisors' meetings--whatever forms of regular face-to-face communication are used--fill a real need. Each enterprise must develop its own routines.

But whether the communication mechanisms be written or oral, regular scheduling is a big help. Meetings at a set time each day, or week, or month, reports or newsletters on a prescribed timetable, are immensely helpful. While this sounds like a gimmick, it is well worth while.

So the eighth requirement is to learn and use the established techniques, the well-known rules.

Barrier No. 9, the last on my list, is the failure to take the mystery out of communication. Through all the work that has been done, and through all that has been written about communication, a great aura of mystery and emotion has sprung up.

Harold Smiddy of General Electric offers this solution: "A great deal could be accomplished," he says, "if we would consider communication in the light of this simple, four-word formula: 'Talk to the guy'"

While communication is not quite that simple, the formula has much to recommend it. So if we "talk to the guy," if we always "tell him why," we may do away with some of the false mystery cloaking the subject, and thus allow ourselves to come to grips with the kernel of the matter instead of wasting our efforts in fighting phantoms.

We have a story in our Company about a foreman who had a gang working for him. He told one of the men to take a shovel and dig a hole. The guy worked hard and dug the hole. The foreman looked at it and said, "Fill it up." The guy filled up the hole again. The foreman said, "Dig a hole over here," indicating another spot. The guy dug the hole. The foreman looked at it and said, "Fill it up." The guy filled up the hole. The third time the foreman told him to dig a hole in another spot, the guy threw down the shovel, threw up his hands, and said, "I quit. You're crazy!"

What's wrong here? The only trouble was that the foreman forgot to tell the man he was looking for a buried pipeline.

So I say that the ninth requirement is: Let's keep it simple, and 'Talk to the Guy'."

Now, admittedly, there is a negative flavor to the consideration of so many obstacles to effective communication. Still, we must recognize their existence.

What we are looking for is a constructive pattern which will help us in solving our communication problems. This pattern must take into consideration all the barriers we have mentioned, and must offer some hope of a final solution.

There is no simple panacea for this complex problem. There is, however, much of a constructive nature that we can do. We can define, and resolve to accomplish in our own organizations or in our own individual spheres of responsibility, the conditions precedent for the establishment of a truly effective communication pattern.

In doing this, we must recognize first and foremost that we can do little about the innate differences between human beings. But a community of interest, acceptance of the team spirit, and identification of an individual's goals with those of his organization will do a job--albeit perhaps less than a 100-per-cent job--of reducing those subjective differences in the matter of communication.

We can do much to establish a healthy communication atmosphere by precept and example. Certainly, all of us can listen more and better. We can instill in those we contact the willingness and desire to communicate. We can help those responsible to us to master the basic skills of clear expression and the ability to listen intelligently to others.

While making a start on these-- and I think we all realize how long and hard a task it will be--we may apply those effective techniques of communication best fitted to the needs of our particular outfits.

When we have done all this, we shall have taken at least one long stride down the road to better communication and with that stride progress on the road to executive development.

We have covered a lot of discouraging material, and have come out at the end with a hard task before us. So long as we realize the magnitude of that task, so long as we are willing to work hard and long to accomplish it, I for one believe we can succeed in the end.

And when we succeed, what shall we accomplish? As we bring our communication up to a level of even reasonable effectiveness, we shall enable ourselves to achieve some order of effective delegation. Further, we shall make possible coordination and integration at the level of delegation. We shall also provide tools for obtaining better performance reporting, better performance measurement, and control.

In short, we shall find, as we approach truly effective communication, that we have realized one of the three necessary steps to releasing the full potential of the executive team--delegation, communication, and measurement.

As leaders, it is up to us at all times to set the proper example. Words are not enough. John Riegel puts it this way: "The force of example is the most effective single means of communication." St. Matthew said: "By their fruits ye shall know them."

Now, I do not want to sound naive, especially before this audience. And I don't want to seem to be preaching to you. One of my kids came home and told me about a girl in her class who had won first prize for an essay on Socrates. The prize-winning essay contained just three sentences: "Socrates was a Greek. Socrates told people what to do. Socrates was poisoned."

So, as I say, I don't want to seem to be telling you what to do. But there are a few ideas we must get across here. These problems are present in big corporations and in small corporations. I presume they are present in the Government and in the military. But a formula composed of intelligence, some of the thoughts we have discussed here today, and a tremendous amount of hard work will get us started.

The Book of Revelation says: "Behold, I have set before thee an open door. . . ."

Thank you very much for your attention.

(16 Dec 1955--250)O/mmg