



# Leaders must communicate: am I making myself clear?

  
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Bosnia was a broken country in 1995 when Nato forces moved in to enforce the Dayton peace accord. Warring factions had to be separated and disarmed, minefields and unexploded munitions cleared, essential infrastructure rebuilt and citizens returned to their home towns. This was an unfamiliar role for a fighting force – how did we go about it?

In a fluid situation, military commanders focus on three key questions. Are we properly organised, with the right resources? Is everybody clear about what they have to do? Are they prepared to go the extra mile to deliver success?

For each element of an operation, a bespoke “battle group” is established under a single commander, usually built around a tank regiment or infantry battalion. As the situation changes, these groupings are adjusted. The commander also has surge capabilities, such as air attack and artillery, that can be applied to gain decisive advantage during the battle.

The ability to bring resources under a single leader to deal with specific problems or opportunities has equal merit in business. Companies may well do this better in a crisis than they do normally.

How do we ensure everybody is clear about what they have to do? Communication is vital, but so is secrecy from the enemy. Instructions are cascaded down through the command chain, from brigade to battalion to company to platoon, for example. At each level the commander makes his own plan and gives his subordinate commanders their objectives.

There is no set duration for this process, but there is the “one-third, two-thirds” rule. You have one-third of the time left until the start of the operation to get out your orders. So, if the operation starts in nine days, you have three days; if it’s nine hours, you have three hours. In the interim, people get an outline of what is coming so they can make best use of time.

Late orders are inexcusable because they give those on the front line, who are at most risk, insufficient time to prepare.

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Before taking on Rommel's Afrika Corps at El Alamein in 1942, General Montgomery, commanding the British Eighth Army, made it clear that communication and being visible to his soldiers were key to confidence: "Every soldier must know... how the little battle he is to fight fits into the larger picture, and how the success of his fighting will influence the battle as a whole."

Clarity is critical, especially when you may be depending on passing instructions by radio in the heat of battle.

Surveys suggest that some 50% of business strategies do not get implemented properly. Techniques for cascading down objectives through an organisation, with clear accountability for delivery and crystal-clear communication, can make a real difference.

Military commanders spend as much time communicating with their

soldiers, directly or indirectly, as they can afford. For their part, soldiers want an emotional contract with their leaders: you look after us, and we will give our all.

Military leaders are also responsible for the reputation of their organisation, which is essential to motivation of the workforce.

They put their point across to external audiences, including the international public, political leaders and through psychological operations, the enemy.

The explosion of media channels means that messages travel quickly to a broad spectrum of audiences.

Positive messages for one audience may generate unwelcome interest or resentment in another. So communications needs special handling, but above all, it needs to be led from the top. There are two aspects: owning the information

campaign, and personally delivering enough of the messages to be seen to be in the driving seat.

Military commanders don't delegate responsibility for tactical decisions to a specialist, and the same goes for communications. It is their responsibility to strike the balance between the risk and the gain.

Alignment is vital between internal messaging – what the leadership team is saying to itself about the situation – and the external messaging. Misalignment is rapidly spotted and is immediately damaging to the reputation of the organisation and its leaders.

Communications are at a premium in a crisis. That is when resilient leaders really earn their pay. The risk is as much in the handling as the issue itself. I have learnt this the hard way: get out there fast with as transparent an explanation as possible to win trust and maintain reputation.