

The Professional Is Political: Three Steps to Avoid Business Communication Stumbles

By Karen Friedman



We can learn a lot from politicians. While this may sound like the opening of a bad joke, the campaign trail can reveal a great deal about communication tactics that work, and ones that don't.

As I exited Amtrak at Philadelphia's 30th Street Station and made my way to the escalator destined upward to the grand train lobby, the oddest thing happened. The moving staircase that was still packed with people heading down to the train platform suddenly changed direction and started heading up.

Like a scene from an embarrassing YouTube clip, surprised passengers stumbled over their own feet trying to walk down the up staircase while spectators laughed out loud. Then all of a sudden, the irony of the situation struck me: How often do we step backward when trying to move forward? How

frequently are our personal and professional goals thwarted with unanticipated hurdles that threaten to prevent us from accomplishing our goals?

The lesson is not in the answers to these questions, but rather in how we learn to turn these mis-steps to our advantage as the new year unfolds. I

believe that some of the best examples can be found in political campaigns, which can teach professionals volumes about communicating more effectively in today's fast-paced attention-challenged workplace.

At the beginning of this decade, I ran for the Pennsylvania state house and lost by less than 3 percentage points in one of the closest state races in the commonwealth's history. At the time, I was hard at work building my own business, which included coaching and training for the Pennsylvania Democratic caucus. The Republican state representative in my home district had

received a lot of negative press for allegedly smacking his girlfriend in public, so the Democratic leadership saw a good opportunity to reclaim the seat and thought tapping a former television reporter with name recognition was a great strategy. When I was first approached, I laughed out loud as the conversation went something like this:

Leadership: How would you like to run for PA House?

Me: Not a chance.

Leadership: Why not?

Me: Should I tell you the truth or tell you what you want to hear?

Leadership: Oh please, we want the truth.

Me: For starters, I've interviewed hundreds of politicians and never liked any all that much, and no offense, but I have no real desire to be like any of you.

Then I signed up.

Like any product, promise, service, or idea, the key is to inspire and motivate so that people believe in what you're selling. As an example, politicians have to sell themselves every time they speak. Let's say a candidate appears warm, friendly, and sincere, but when you meet them in person, they are scowling, appear not as happy as they did on TV, offer a droopy handshake, and seem distracted as you speak to them. You would probably rethink your decision to vote for that person, just as you would probably not be inclined to follow their lead in the workplace.

While social networks were not as prominent when I ran for office, they were already forcing people to have conversations to motivate and empower others. That meant talking with listeners instead of at them as I had learned from a 20-year career in television news. When we interviewed people, they wanted to share their stories. When we edited it for broadcast, we wanted snippets of information that made our viewers and listeners feel what it must have been like to be at the scene of that story. That meant making information relevant to others.

When people are unaccountable, they often make excuses, blame others, or play dumb, which can create an atmosphere of mistrust. In campaigns as well as in business, accepting responsibility and not being afraid to say you erred in judgment makes you "real" and actually creates confidence in your ability to lead.

Step 1: Keep the conversation real

When I ran for office, urban sprawl was a hot issue, and my opponent was a member of the township planning commission and a self-proclaimed topic expert. Every time we were both questioned about it, she talked from experience and was usually quoted. I was not. That's when I realized I needed to keep the conversation real and speak people's language, so I changed my approach.

The next time I was interviewed, I said, "Traffic has gotten so bad out here in Montgomery County, that I could balance my checkbook on the way home from work." Granted, you don't need a college education to come up with that one, but it resonated with readers, and every time I said it, I got quoted. So of course, I said it all the time.

Politicians understand the importance of using real-life examples and storytelling to make an impact on listeners, but business communicators often lag behind, afraid that what's appropriate in other settings is not appropriate in the workplace. Quite the opposite is true.

In medicine, it's the stories of sick patients that inspire researchers to search for cures. In war time, we cling

to stories that offer hope about people who have overcome insurmountable odds. The stories of grief, hope and optimism that immediately followed the horrific events of September 11, 2001, are forever etched into our personal and national psyche. Stories are real and create rapport that communicators need to share if they hope to drive the message home.

Step 2: Be accountable

In my campaign office, we had a young woman in charge of our door-to-door walking campaign. It was up to her to determine what neighborhoods we canvassed and how many times we returned. There was a big map in the office with colored pins stuck on streets to illustrate where we had trudded. Shortly before the election, I noticed that we missed an entire section of the district.

When I questioned the person in charge, she became very defensive and claimed that her strategy never included campaigning in this area. As it turned out, she made a mistake and was embarrassed to admit it. If she had taken responsibility, we could have changed course and potentially secured additional votes.

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Step 3: Have heart

My older son was only nine during my short-lived political career, but he taught me a lesson that I will never forget. It was a very competitive race in which many people said that they would only vote their party, regardless of personal beliefs. On election night, my son and husband were assigned to hand out literature at a polling place. Every time someone would walk in the door, Brett would run up to them, hand out my flyer and scream, "Vote for my mom!"



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On the way out of the voting booth, an older man grabbed my husband's arm and said, "I've never voted for another party in my life until tonight, and I did it because of your son."

Without knowing it, this nine-year-old boy instinctually knew that politicians can't win races without good grassroots organizations, but more importantly, he cut through the politics and grabbed at their hearts.

Political strategy, like business strategy, is driven by daily conversations that take place with a few trusted advisors or with crowds of thousands. Though what you say may be different for each

group, how you say it is as important as what you say. Listeners may not always believe in your ideas, but it is essential that you speak with conviction so that they believe that you believe in what you're saying.

In my book *Shut Up and Say Something*, there is a more extensive list of executive take-aways from political campaigns. While all are important, perhaps the most significant is the take-away that my young son so innocently taught those around him that election day: He understood how to push past the hurdles by making his message personal.

Karen Friedman is president of *Karen Friedman Enterprises* and a professional communication coach and speaker. She is the author of *Shut Up and Say Something: Business Communication Strategies to Overcome Challenges and Influence Listeners* (Praeger 2010) and co-author of *Speaking of Success: World Class Experts Share Their Secrets*; www.karenfriedman.com.

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