

Communicating With Credibility

by Christine W. Zust, M.A.



ZUST+CO.
Training, Speaking, Facilitation

Credibility. How do you get it? More importantly, how do you keep it? Gaining credibility takes years to achieve, and maintaining it is a lifetime goal for any leader. One wrong move can erase in an instant many years of hard work. Communicating with credibility is an art form, one which you can master by using a few simple guidelines.

Align your verbal and nonverbal language. Credibility is enhanced through consistent verbal and nonverbal language. The key word here is consistent. Executives who overlook nonverbal language, or body language, are dismissing one of communication's most powerful tools. When your verbal and nonverbal language is out of alignment, you send out a mixed message. The result? The person receiving that message is confused, wondering what to believe -- your verbal or nonverbal. Nonverbal communication has many functions, but the two highlighted here are the functions of reinforcing or contradicting your verbal message. When nonverbal reinforces the verbal message, you maintain your credibility. When the nonverbal contradicts, or is inconsistent, with the verbal message, you run the risk of sending mixed messages, and losing credibility. For instance, the leader who says, "I am in full support of these salary negotiations" but looks away or down, sends out a conflicting nonverbal message that says, "I'm not really in full support of this." When the verbal and nonverbal messages are conflicting, the nonverbal message will always win, because it is perceived to be more believable. That is why it's called the "silent language." Remember, the foundation of your credibility is your believability. Be consistent in your verbal and nonverbal language, and you will never have to worry about sending mixed messages which may jeopardize your credibility.

Lead by Listening. Ask executives across the country what they look for in their top management teams, and most will say, "Good listeners." The good news about listening is that it is a learned behavior, which means, even if you are a poor listener today, you can train yourself to be a better listener tomorrow. How well do you listen to your key clients and customers? Your employees? Your stockholders? Your key advisors? The good listener does not merely hear what is being said but rather observes and uses all the senses to reflect on the whole picture. Why should listening matter to you as a leader? In today's competitive marketplace, silent observation is one of the most influential tools you can develop to gain a keen sense of awareness and keep you at the front of your game.

Make realistic promises and keep them. Credibility can fizzle if you don't keep your word, whether you have communicated it in writing or verbally. Your credibility slips when you don't live up to the standards you have set for yourself or others have set for you. If promises are made and repeatedly broken, you begin to lose your credibility. Whether it is a key client, a constituent or your staff who you make promises to, you will spiral downward ever so quickly if you don't deliver on your promises. If you have a bad habit of committing more than you can deliver, take this advice: Think before you speak, and realistically promise only what you know you can deliver.

Speak from the heart. Some of the most powerful presenters are people who speak from the heart. When a message is communicated from the heart, it is more believable. An audience can quickly tell the difference between a speaker who is genuine and one who is artificial. Some professionals have their presentations so over-rehearsed that they are often interpreted by the audience as phony or insincere. Don't just talk the talk. Walk the talk.

Be yourself. This is an easy one. Many people who fall into the credibility gap do so because they misrepresent themselves as someone else. We all know individuals who have inflated their professional accomplishments to appear more attractive for a leadership position. They soon discover once they are in the position, they don't have the level of expertise others expected of them (and everyone around them knows it!). People can see through individuals who try to position themselves as someone they are

not. While there are people who spend time joining the right clubs, travelling in the right circles, and attending high profile events, the in crowd knows the difference between a wannabe leader and the real thing.

I recently reviewed an advance copy of an acceptance speech for the recipient of a prestigious community award. I immediately recommended that he delete several canned jokes from his speech. His assistant assured me that the corny joke-telling was part of her boss's delivery style. I advised against it because it jeopardized the man's integrity. This executive had more than 50 years of outstanding leadership in his professional and volunteer roles, so he did not need a joke about a farmer's daughter or a frog to connect with his audience. Surely, he had more meaningful personal stories to tell. On the night of his presentation, I was pleased when he deleted the jokes in exchange for a more believable humorous personal story. It worked, because he did not rely on someone else's stale joke to artificially spice up his speech. The audience responded very favorably to his story, because he was being himself.

Be an expert. You are at the top because you know your business, and you have an uncanny ability to lead others. Yet, there are leaders who lack credibility because they only have a superficial knowledge base with no depth. The more you know, the more believable you are. But it doesn't stop there. The credible leader is one who is willing to share that acquired knowledge with others and encourage open communication and idea sharing. It's not just how much you know that positions you as a credible leader, but how willing you are to share that knowledge with others.

Last year, I attended a professional development program which was presented by a high-ranking female executive with a national company. While she delivered a great multi-media presentation and was an articulate speaker, she fell apart during the question-answer period. Of the five questions asked of her, she could answer only one, and deferred the other four to her technical support staff operating the computer in the back of the room. She immediately lost credibility with the audience. The energy level in the room plummeted. If she knew her business and had done a better job of preparing for the question-answer period, she would have retained credibility with the audience.

Be honest. We need to look no further than the political arena to select our best examples of how to lose credibility by covering up. What do you think of when you hear the words, "I am not a crook" and "I did not have sex with that woman." Do you think of honesty? Hardly. Presidents Nixon and Clinton could have saved face if they had been honest in their statements from the beginning. If they had admitted wrongdoing, the public would have been more forgiving. Instead, their statements came back to haunt them. The old saying, "What goes around comes around" demonstrates this to be true. Leaders are the first to be scrutinized during tenuous times, because they are in control, whether they represent government, corporate America or a non-profit organization. Too many leaders think they are invincible. When you accept a leadership position, you also accept full responsibility for your words and actions. Be honest from the beginning, and your credibility will remain intact.

Be proactive. It's never too late to do a credibility check. To stay on track, ask yourself questions, like, "What could potentially jeopardize my credibility?" "What steps can I take to improve my credibility?" "What can I do each day to ensure that my credibility is maintained?" The more aware you, the better equipped you are to keep your credibility elevated.

There is no asset more valuable or powerful than your personal credibility, because it goes to the very core of who you are as a person and a leader. You are responsible for building and maintaining it...for life.

Christine Zust, M.A., is a communication expert who helps executive leaders and management teams develop credibility and clout with their customers and key clients. She is president of Zust & Company, a Cleveland-based training, consulting and coaching firm. She can be reached at (440) 777-8373 or visit the Zust & Company website at www.zustco.com.