Instructions

This exercise asks you to write a single, brief paragraph. It should not take the form of a larger document, such as a letter, an email, a report, or a plan. Submit 1 paragraph with no more than 250 words.

In order to write your paragraph, complete the following steps:

1. Read the article. Although it is written for public and media relations professionals, it also is useful to digital, corporate, non-profit, health, and political communicators.

2. Consider the following crisis. It is April 20, 2010. You are the Communication Director for the company BP. You have just learned that an explosion occurred on an oil rig called the Deepwater Horizon, killing an unspecified number of people and causing crude oil to start spilling into the Gulf of Mexico.

3. Assume you are writing to the Chief Executive Officer for the company BP.

4. Present one specific recommendation for how your company should communicate about the event to a stakeholder, ensuring your recommendation incorporates the advice in the article. (You do not have to conduct research to complete this assignment.) In addition, describe the specific arguments that you would use to convince the Chief Executive Officer that your recommendation would be effective in reaching the stakeholder.

   Note that your paragraph will represent one idea that could be part of a larger document with additional ideas. This exercise is not asking you to write the entire document; instead, it is looking for a sample of what could be part of the larger document.

5. Limit your writing to 1 paragraph that is double-spaced and contains no more than 250 words. Start the paragraph by presenting your recommendation. Then use the rest of your paragraph to describe your arguments that justify your recommendation.
June 29, 2012

For more than 30 years, Helio Fred Garcia has helped counsel CEOs and large corporations through crisis situations. He is currently the president of the New York-based crisis management firm Logos Consulting Group. Garcia also serves as the executive director for the Logos Institute for Crisis Management & Executive Leadership.

“If you can’t communicate effectively, you will not lead,” Garcia says in his latest book, “The Power of Communication.” Here he talks with The Strategist about how a leader’s success during a crisis situation is contingent on his or her ability to communicate.

**Given the number of social distractions, how can leaders most effectively engage an audience today?**

Social media has obliterated the distinction between inside and outside, internal communication and external communication, public and private. Now, more than ever, leaders need to be strategic in how they approach their key audiences. Effectively engaging with key audiences is no longer a nice-to-have quality; it’s a must-have.

Whether it was conference calls 25 years ago, or videoconferencing 15 years ago, or blogs six years ago, or Twitter three years ago — becoming distracted by the latest technology can be counterproductive. All engagement, regardless of the medium, needs to be directed at the change the leader wants to effect in the audience.

**Why is language such a powerful leadership discipline?**

Communication has power, but like any powerful tool, it needs to be used effectively or it can cause self-inflicted harm. Harnessing the power of communication is a fundamental leadership discipline.

Communication is the continuation of business by other means. Leaders need to invest as much time at getting good at communication as they do at the more quantitative or technical elements of their jobs.

I have concluded that many leaders, much of the time, fundamentally misunderstand communication. One reason some leaders misunderstand communication is that they think they’re already good at it. They’ve been speaking since they were 1 year old, reading since age 4 or 5, writing since soon after that. Unlike just about every other discipline leaders have had to master, they’ve been communicating their whole lives.

I have found that many leaders suffer career-defining blunders because they don’t take communication nearly as seriously as they take most other elements of their jobs. Think of BP’s [now former CEO] Tony Hayward and “I’d like my life back.”

Effective leaders see communication as a critical professional aptitude and work hard at getting it right.

**What are some ways that leaders can expand their worldview and see their business from someone else’s perspective?**

Understanding an audience is critical in order for leaders to inspire trust and confidence.

Ideally leaders have direct experience with the stakeholders they need to connect with — they visit with employees, with investors, with business partners, with customers. I have one client, the CEO of a global pharmaceutical company, who relocated his entire corporate headquarters to Shanghai for a month. He had all his direct reports meet with him there. This experience helped his company become better acquainted with the culture, customer base, regulatory climate and employee population in this company’s key growth market.

Leaders also need to seek the counsel of those who interact with company stakeholders all of the time. This is a core part of the public relations practitioner’s responsibility: to be an expert in the way stakeholders think, what they feel, how they make decisions and what matters to them.

Taking stakeholders seriously requires a certain respect for their point of view. It requires curiosity about what matters to them, understanding what it takes to win them over and to keep their trust and confidence.

Effective leaders and their public relations counselors connect with audiences by understanding what matters to...
Effective leaders and their public relations counselors connect with audiences by understanding what matters to [them] and by speaking in ways that resonate with them.

Why is it important for leaders to define a crisis?

During a crisis, stakeholders look to company leaders for a sign that they are in command of the situation. The single biggest predictor of reputational harm during a crisis is the perception by stakeholders that a company and its leaders don’t care.

Leaders all too often allow delicate situations to linger too long. Worried about embarrassment, litigation or being fired, leaders become paralyzed with fear and either make poor decisions or no decisions. Effective crisis response is a process of showing that a company is aware, cares and is doing what it should to resolve the issue.

During a crisis, you say that giving people facts often isn’t enough. How should leaders present facts to employees, the media, etc., in such situations?

Too often leaders fall into the trap of believing that facts are persuasive. Facts aren’t. Facts can be persuasive only to the degree that they fit some prior frame of reference.

I do a lot of work with pharmaceutical executives. They say to me that “the facts speak for themselves.” What these executives don’t realize is that facts are always open to interpretation, unless controlled by context.

Facts carry no particular meaning beyond the statistical. Since those who say “the facts speak for themselves” usually associate facts with truth, framing helps them see that truth consists of facts embedded in a context that creates a true impression. Failing to provide frames for facts is, in many ways, a failure of leadership.

Effective leaders first frame the context of their message and then deliver appropriate supporting facts.

What makes a habitually strategic communicator?

Effective communication isn’t about pushing information to an audience. It isn’t about facts or data. It isn’t about what sounds good in the moment. It isn’t about spin. And it certainly isn’t what makes the speaker feel good.

Strategy is a process of ordered thinking — of thinking in the right order. Ineffective leadership communication begins with “What do we want to say?”

That’s both selfish and self-indulgent. And it’s unlikely to succeed. It’s in the wrong order: It starts where thinking should ultimately end up. It skips the essential questions that make sense of the situation, establish goals, identify audiences and attitudes, and prescribe a course of action to influence those attitudes.

A habitually strategic communicator never begins with “What do we want to say?” but rather with a sequence of prior questions.