

## Introduction: Leadership, Discipline, and Effective Communication

Tony Hayward faced the press on a Venice, Louisiana, dock. It was May 30, 2010, and the BP chief executive officer had been living on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico for the past month. On April 20, the Deepwater Horizon oil rig had exploded, killing 11, injuring dozens, and beginning a gusher that in 100 days pumped five million barrels of crude oil into the Gulf waters. The Deepwater Horizon disaster had been the dominant story in the news media—it was All-BP-All-the-Time.

Hayward, clearly beleaguered and sleep-deprived, seemed frustrated with suggestions by the media and others that BP—formerly known as British Petroleum—and its leadership weren't doing enough to stop the flow of oil and protect the Gulf ecosystem. He spoke in front of heavy equipment being readied to be deployed for the cleanup. In a tone of frustration, Hayward tried to show that he cared. He attempted an apology, tried to show that he took the situation seriously: "We're sorry. We're sorry for the massive disruption it's caused their lives. And you know we're—there's no one who wants this thing over more than I do. You know, I'd like my life back."<sup>1</sup>

It didn't work. Hayward's statement had the opposite effect. Instead of showing he cared and that he took Gulf residents' plight seriously, the "I'd like my life back" quote sounded like self-pity. Critics pounced. There were 11 rig workers who would never get their lives back; dozens of injured whose lives would never be the same; thousands on the coast whose lives and livelihoods were disrupted. They wanted their lives back, too.

“I’d like my life back” became a defining moment. It crystallized for the media and for politicians the apparent callowness of BP’s leadership. It wasn’t the first of Hayward’s verbal blunders. The *New York Times* had previously quoted him from an internal meeting: “What the hell did we do to deserve this?”<sup>2</sup> Nor was it the last. But “I’d like my life back” defined Hayward, BP, and the Gulf recovery. The take-away: Hayward cares only about himself.

“I’d like my life back” also became self-fulfilling. It began Hayward’s inexorable decline. Six weeks after the quote he was removed as CEO and given a make-work position; he left the company several months later. In the battle for public opinion—for trust, support, the benefit of the doubt—Hayward lost. It was a failure of leadership on a massive scale. And it began with a failure of communication. And that failure, in turn, was a failure of discipline.

Hayward’s blunder is not unique to him. It should be a wake-up call to CEOs and other leaders, to all whose leadership responsibilities require inspiring trust and confidence verbally. Communication has power. But as with any form of power, it needs to be harnessed effectively or it can all too often backfire.

This book applies the Marine Corps’ strategy doctrine, as embodied in its *Warfighting* manual, to leadership communication. It seeks to help those who engage audiences for a living—whether in positions of leadership or in communication support functions—to do so at a high level of craft.

## Why *Warfighting*?

“The battle for public opinion” is a metaphor. So is “I’d like my life back.” Metaphors matter. Metaphors trigger worldviews and set expectations. As the Berkeley cognitive linguist George Lakoff notes, we tend to live our lives in metaphor, but are generally unaware of the metaphors we live by (see Chapter 8, “Content: Word Choice, Framing, and Meaning,” for more).<sup>3</sup>

Take, for example, the word “strategy.” We may think we know what it means. But it’s actually a metaphor. In ancient Greek, the word *strategos* meant a general or the leader of an army. That word

derived from two other Greek words: *stratos*, or army, and *agein*, to lead. So *stratos* (army) + *agein* (to lead) = *strategos* (one who leads an army). Note that *stratos*, army, was itself a metaphor. The literal meaning of the word is “organized formation,” as in the layers of rock on a cliff wall.

For the longest time, “strategy” or its equivalents in other languages meant only the art of leading an armed force. But in modern times it has become a metaphor for any goal-oriented activity. Business strategy is a metaphor for using the goal-oriented approach of leading an army to lead a company.

War and communication are not the same thing. But many of the goal-oriented principles of leading an effective armed force can be applied to the leadership discipline of public communication.

For example, the 19th-century Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz defined war as “an act of will directed toward a living entity that reacts.”<sup>4</sup> This simple observation is quite profound. War, at its essence, isn’t about fighting or killing, at least not for their own sake. Rather, it’s about an outcome. A reaction. A change.

So is effective communication. I have long taken the metaphor Clausewitz provides, and have translated it this way:

**Communication is an act of will  
directed toward a living entity that reacts.**

Let’s parse this definition:

**Communication is an act of will...**

Effective communication is intentional. It is goal-oriented. It is strategic. Unlike ineffective communication, effective communication isn’t impulsive or top-of-mind. It isn’t self-indulgent. And communication isn’t just about what one says. It’s about anything one does or is observed doing. It’s about any engagement with a stakeholder, including silence, inaction, and action.

**...directed toward a living entity...**

Stakeholders aren’t passive vessels that simply absorb messages. Rather, they are living, breathing human beings and groups of human beings. They have their own opinions, ideas, hopes, dreams, fears, prejudices, attention spans, and appetites for listening. Most important, it

is a mistake to assume that audiences think and behave just as we do. Most don't. Understanding an audience and its preconceptions, and the barriers that might prevent an audience from accepting what one is saying, is a key part of effective communication.

**...that reacts.**

This is the element most lost on many leaders. The only reason to engage an audience is to change something, to provoke a reaction. Effective communication provokes the desired reaction; ineffective communication doesn't. Ineffective communication isn't noticed, or it confuses, or it causes a different reaction than the one desired. Tony Hayward certainly got his life back, but not in the manner he had hoped.

And whatever the words one uses, we can count on audiences to compare the words to the speaker's own actions as well as to prior words. The words set expectations; the actions fulfill or betray those expectations. Trust arises when expectations are met and is lost when they are not.

So effective communication is hard. It requires discipline. It requires understanding the desired reaction among the groups to which one communicates, which in turn requires knowing all one can about that group. And then it requires saying and doing all that is necessary—and only what is necessary—to provoke that desired reaction. And it also requires understanding the absolutely predictable consequences—both intended and unintended—of words, silence, inaction, and action.

## **About the Marines**

The United States Marine Corps is the nation's mobility force in readiness. The tip of the spear. It's ready to deploy anywhere, any time, on any mission.

The Marine Corps is also a leadership factory. It instills qualities of initiative, teamwork, and dedication to mission. It pushes accountability down to the bottom of the chain of command, even as it holds leaders at the very top of the chain accountable for their subordinates' decisions. Marines follow orders, but not blindly. Commander's intent

is an essential part of an order. Understanding a commander's intent is the responsibility of each Marine. And making that intent clear is the responsibility of each commander, of whatever rank.

And at whatever rank, every Marine is a rifleman. Regardless of any Marine's current function, he or she is accomplished in the use of arms. Unlike in other armed services, the expectation is that every Marine, regardless of occupation (lawyer, pilot, public affairs officer, or auto mechanic) is proficient in infantry tactics and the effective use of firearms.

Every Marine is also a spokesman. I was present when the senior Marine public affairs officer—a brigadier general—described to the students of the Marine Corps Command and Staff College the Corps' expectation of any Marine in the presence of the news media: "Make sure each of your Marines knows this: If you're deployed to a war zone and there's a reporter around, we expect you to do three things:

- Engage. Speak with the reporter.
- Tell the truth. Don't lie, but also don't reveal confidential, classified, or sensitive operational information.
- Stay in your lane. If you drive a tank, talk about your tank. If you fly a plane, talk about your plane. Don't talk about anything that isn't your direct responsibility."

This is a courageous policy, and one most employers probably would not adopt. Most organizations try to centralize press communication. But making each Marine a spokesperson is typical of the Marines. They know that the Marines' reputation can be won or lost through the actions of any single Marine. Not just an officer, but a private right out of Parris Island boot camp. So they hold each Marine accountable. But with accountability comes authority.

## **Communication Is a Leadership Discipline**

Whatever else leadership may be, it is experienced publicly. While it may emanate from within, it is a public phenomenon. A leader is judged based on three fundamental public leadership attributes:

- The leader's bearing: how the leader carries himself or herself
- The words the leader uses to engage others
- The manner in which the leader engages others

These are elements of communication. And they apply well beyond the armed services.

And as a leadership discipline, communication benefits from the structures, concepts, and principles of effective leadership in other fields.

The Marines continue to enjoy a reputation as the nation's elite fighting force. It is no surprise to me that they live up to their slogan: The Few. The Proud. They make reputation a priority, both in what they do and in what they say.

The elements that make a good Marine also make a good communicator.

## How This Book Came About

I have had the good fortune to provide communication workshops and related services to Marines continuously since 1991, just after the first Gulf War ended. I had published an article that summer in *Public Relations Quarterly* noting that the U.S. military had embraced the principles of Carl von Clausewitz both in its execution of the Gulf War and in its public affairs operations to support the war. Clausewitz, the 19th-century Prussian general, is the author of *On War*, one of the most influential books of Western civilization and the basis of most modern military and business strategy. In my article, I noted that any serious student of strategy or communication should be familiar with the principles of Clausewitz. His most famous principle is that **war is merely the continuation of policy by other means: The goal of the war is not to fight, but to accomplish a political objective.**<sup>5</sup> I argued that professional communicators could learn from him. I translated Clausewitz's principle as follows: **Communication is merely the continuation of business by other means. The goal of communication is not to communicate, but to accomplish some tangible business goal.**

When the *Public Relations Quarterly* article came out, I was in my fourth year teaching public relations strategy and related topics at New York University, and Clausewitz was a big part of my course. Unbeknownst to me, one of my students was a Marine, just back from Iraq, and about to switch jobs: from helicopter pilot to public affairs officer. He had taken my course to get a head start. He asked if he could show my article to his commanding officer. At the same time, my friend Jim Lukaszewski had a scheduling conflict and was unable to teach his usual session at the Marines' annual East Coast Commanders Public Affairs Symposium, an annual weeklong introduction to public affairs for all Marines east of the Mississippi who are starting new commands. He recommended me to the commanding officer of the unit that managed the Symposium, who recognized my name from the article. I have taught at that Symposium every year since. For many of those years I taught on a Tuesday and Jim taught on a Thursday. I have also taught at every West Coast Commanders Public Affairs Symposium since 2006. From 2004 to 2009, I taught in the Brigadier General Select Orientation Course in Washington, and for several years I conducted workshops in the Command and Staff College and Officer Candidate School in Quantico, Virginia.

In 2006, I was teaching in Quantico and visited the Marine Corps bookstore. There I found a slim volume called *Warfighting: U.S. Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication No. 1*. It's required reading for every Marine. It lays out an approach to strategy and leadership that informs what all Marines do. Think of it as the Marine Corps Bible. While it isn't as famous as Clausewitz, it has several advantages: It is contemporary, it is assigned reading for every Marine, and it is much easier to read.

Flying home on the shuttle, I couldn't put the book down. Just as I had demonstrated in my article for *Public Relations Quarterly* that changing several words in Clausewitz's *On War* provided a framework for understanding communication, changing just a few words in *Warfighting* led to a much richer and deeper understanding of effective public communication, both for leaders and for those who advise them.

Then I had an idea. I was about to teach a new course on communication strategy in the MS in Public Relations and Corporate Communication program at New York University. I had already decided

to assign *Clausewitz on Strategy: Inspiration and Insight from a Master Strategist*. The authors, from the Strategy Institute of the Boston Consulting Group, extract the essence of *On War* and apply it to contemporary business strategy.

I decided to supplement that reading with *Warfighting*, requiring students to read it before the first class. When I sent the syllabus to the department, it raised a few eyebrows. But to his credit, the academic director gave me the green light, and I posted the syllabus online.

In the first class, before discussing the book, I polled the students:

- How many were confused when they saw that the first book in a communication strategy course was a Marine Corps book called *Warfighting*? Nearly every hand went up.
- How many were concerned? Most hands stayed up.
- How many were angry? About a third of the hands stayed up.
- How many are still angry after reading the book? All hands came down.

I found the most counterculture-seeming student who had just put her hand down, and asked, “Why were you angry when you saw the syllabus?” She looked me in the eye and said, “I thought you were going to feed us propaganda, try to get us to like the military, to support the war in Iraq.” And now? She smiled, and said, “I love this book. I have given copies to my parents and friends. I want to know why we don’t know more about this book.”

I’ve used *Warfighting* continuously ever since. And I’ve used it beyond my NYU classroom. I’ve used it in strategy boot camps for the public affairs department of a major insurance company, with the communication staff of a large pharmaceutical company, and even with clergy and not-for-profit executives, sometimes to their initial discomfort. I’ve urged individual CEOs, CFOs, and other corporate leaders to read it to help them both think strategically and communicate effectively.

In all civilian contexts, my students and clients have enthusiastically embraced *Warfighting*, and the comments have tended to cluster into these three categories:

1. This is one of the single-most-useful insights into how to be strategic in communication that I've ever read.
2. I never knew the Marines were so thoughtful.
3. The lessons of *Warfighting* go well beyond fighting wars or communicating. The book is about how to think strategically. It deserves a broader audience.

I agree. I believe that *Warfighting* is one of the undiscovered gems in strategic thinking, with significant civilian application. This book attempts to do for *Warfighting* what *Clausewitz on Strategy* does for *On War*: extract the essence of a military manual and apply those essential lessons to the nonmilitary, professional practice of public communication as a leadership discipline.

## About This Book

This book does three things:

1. It translates core *Warfighting* principles into guidelines for effective leadership communication. These provide an important conceptual framework, and the individual principles serve as guideposts along the journey we will take. But they're merely the starting point.
2. It applies best practices in leadership communication drawn from my 33 years of advising and coaching leaders, and from my 24 years of teaching management and communication in graduate programs in a number of universities. This is the meat of the book—the big takeaway. It could easily exist without the *Warfighting* principles, but I have found in my teaching and coaching that the combination is more powerful than either standing alone.
3. It makes extensive use of case studies and examples, of both effective and ineffective communication by leaders in high-stakes situations.

All three of these strands run through the entire book. Each chapter emphasizes the leadership disciplines particular to that chapter's topic, and closes with two recap sections: The first is the gathering

of all the *Warfighting* principles discussed in that chapter. The second is Lessons for Leaders and Communicators, the chapter's key takeaways.

Organizationally, the book is divided into three parts, focused on principles, strategy, and skills.

**Part I: “Leadership and Communication: Connecting with Audiences.”** This takes up about half the book, and is divided into five chapters. The entire part focuses on the foundational principles of effective communication, all of which are grounded in connecting with and influencing audiences.

Chapter 1, “Words Matter,” establishes the need to take language seriously as a leadership discipline. It covers the need to adapt language as circumstances change and as audiences, adversaries, and critics react to what a leader is saying and doing. It also focuses on the need to listen and to engage for a purpose: to change the way people think and feel, and what they know and do.

Chapter 2, “Taking Audiences Seriously,” is a deep dive into understanding audiences. The leadership discipline here is to think of audiences as living, breathing entities with their own ideas, goals, plans, and desires even to be in relationship with the leader. The key is to recognize that audiences don't think as leaders do, care about what leaders care about, or understand what leaders understand. If we are to move people, we need to meet them where they are, but that means knowing where they are and knowing how to move them.

Chapter 3, “Words Aren't Enough,” focuses on how tempting it can be to say all the right things in high-stakes situations. But saying the right thing without delivering on the expectations that communication sets is a recipe for disaster: for loss of trust, loyalty, confidence, and ultimately of competitive position. Trust arises when expectations are met, and the leadership discipline is to align what a leader says with what the leader does.

Chapter 4, “Speed, Focus, and the First Mover Advantage,” covers shaping the communication agenda by being the first to define one's situation, motives, and actions. The leadership discipline is to say and do what is necessary to move audiences before critics, adversaries, the media, or social media have a chance to, and then to ensure

that all communications, from all sources, are consistent and mutually reinforcing.

Chapter 5, “Initiative, Maneuver, and Disproportionality,” focuses on ways to control the communication agenda, and on outsized risk and reward: how relatively minor changes or events can have a significant effect on the outcome. The leadership discipline is to be both disciplined and nimble, to avoid making small mistakes that cause great harm, and engage stakeholders in such a timely and effective way that we get a higher return on our communication investment than we otherwise would.

**Part II: “Strategy and Communication: Planning and Execution.”** This section has only one chapter, but it’s a long one. This part focuses on the need to be intentional, coordinated, and sequenced in planning and implementing communication, especially in high-stakes situations.

Chapter 6, “Goals, Strategies, and Tactics: Preparing and Planning,” focuses on the need to think carefully before communicating. It shows how easy it is for leaders to get tied up in the tactics of saying things, rather than being thoughtful about how to win hearts and minds. It also notes that preparing to communicate is often a leading indicator that there are gaps in a leader’s thinking. If a leader isn’t attentive to those gaps, you can be sure that stakeholders, critics, and adversaries will be. The leadership discipline is to have a clear intent and to organize thinking, decision making, communication planning, and communication implementation in the service of that intent.

**Part III: “Building Skills: Getting Good at Communicating Well.”** This section focuses on the core skills that leaders need to become effective communicators. While not intended as a comprehensive how-to, it focuses on three areas that I have found leaders of all stripes and of all levels of ability need to master: how they carry themselves; how they manage meaning; and how the human brain works. Leaders need mastery of all three to be able to move people and to avoid self-inflicted harm.

Chapter 7, “Performance: The Physicality of Audience Engagement,” begins by establishing the leadership discipline of taking seriously the need for continuous honing of communication skills. Even leaders who are good communicators need periodic tuneups or they

will be less effective than they could be. The chapter then covers the basic interpersonal and group presentation skills that convey confidence and that engage audiences well.

Chapter 8, “Content: Word Choice, Framing, and Meaning,” covers how leaders can shape the frame of reference so that audiences understand what the leader wants them to. The leadership discipline is to take seriously the way that words trigger worldviews, and to understand how framing needs to precede facts. All too often, leaders believe that facts and data are convincing. The chapter explores how facts are convincing only if they make sense within a frame of reference. And there’s a first mover advantage: Whoever frames the topic first tends to win.

Chapter 9, “Audiences: Attention, Retention, and How Hearts and Minds Work,” is a deep dive into the human brain and what it means for leaders. The leadership discipline is to appreciate that audiences are human and that human nature—literally the way the human brain works—determines what audiences are capable of. The chapter is an overview of current understanding from the fields of neurophysiology, cognitive psychology, and evolutionary biology to provide insights on how leaders can actually connect with audiences and win hearts and minds.

The book closes with two summaries:

Chapter 10, “Putting It All Together: Becoming a Habitually Strategic Communicator,” harvests best practices from the previous chapters and organizes them into Nine Principles of Effective Leadership Communication. These can provide a quick reference point for monitoring your own communication leadership skills.

The appendix gathers all the *Warfighting* Principles embedded in the chapters and provides them in a single place, for easy reference.