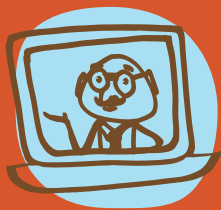


ERIK PALMER



BEFORE YOU SAY A WORD



*A School Leader's Guide
to Clear and Compelling
Communication*

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Preface

“Hey, don’t blame the messenger!”

You’ve heard this phrase before. It’s what people say when there’s bad news to deliver—bad news that listeners don’t want to hear.

In the school where I first worked, our team leader said it often. We chose Tom to be the representative for our combined 5th and 6th grade team, and he attended meetings with the other grade-level leaders and the principal. Often, he came back with reports of some new things we had to do—initiatives we had to implement, schedule changes to accommodate assemblies, and additional work required of us. For example, Tom once returned from a meeting and told us that we had to pick up morning playground duty.

“Parents are dropping their kids off well before school starts, and the playground is full. There is no supervision, and so if something happens, there is no one out there to help. Each grade level has to have one teacher out on the playground before school.”

We got agitated and began to complain.

“That’s outside our contract hours!”

“We have to prepare for the day.”

“That cuts into planning time.”

“Well then, tell the parents they can’t drop their kids off early!”

This went on for quite a while. Seeing how worked up we were getting, Tom said, “Hey, don’t blame me. I’m just the messenger.” He used that phrase frequently. When someone argued that a schedule change would mess up their unit testing plans? “Hey, don’t blame me. I’m just the messenger.” When we learned the new reading assessment would be given the morning after Halloween trick-or-treating? “Hey, don’t blame me. I’m just the messenger.”

At the time, it seemed like Tom was right. Why vent at him when it was the new thing or directive that we hated? The new thing wasn’t *Tom’s* idea, and he had no power to change it. It was the *message* that was to blame, not Tom. Don’t blame the messenger.

After a few years in education, I began to think differently. By then, I had received a lot of messages, many of which were undercut and sometimes ruined by the messenger. I saw good initiatives dead on arrival because of how poorly they were presented. I witnessed well-meaning administrators create ill will because of the way they spoke to the staff. I attended dreadful professional development sessions where people walked away with little because the presenters were so dull. I noticed that few paid attention during staff meetings because little seemed worth paying attention to.

Why This Book

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when meetings and presentations went online, it was more apparent than ever that weak speaking was a problem. Recall the disjointed Zoom meetings, webinars that seemed painfully long, the professional development videos that were boring and hard to watch. The poor-to-mediocre oral communication that was tiresome in person was even worse on the small screens of digital devices. So staff members, webinar attendees, and video watchers checked out, turned off their cameras and microphones, and moved on to amusing cat videos and online shoe shopping. Although school and district leaders had the communication tools necessary to move messages online, they lacked the foundational communication skills

they needed to use those tools well. They didn't know how to be clear, engaging, and impressive speakers. I don't blame the tools. I blame the messengers.

Of course, I don't really *blame them* blame them. I believe these messengers—primarily teacher leaders and administrators—did the best they could. Steven Weber is an assistant principal at Rogers Heritage High School in Arkansas and a former assistant superintendent. Steven told me that “it is very challenging making the shift from teaching students to leading professional development and speaking with adults. Many educators are very nervous when they have their first few public presentations.” Why? Because education leaders seldom get the training they need to do the job they have been given. Let me ask you: when, on your path to your leadership role, did you get specific help with oral communication skills?

Poor communication is a problem in many workplaces. In a survey reported in *Forbes* (Hoory, 2023), nearly 50 percent of respondents reported that ineffective communication decreased their job satisfaction; 42 percent said it affected their stress levels. Pause a minute and reflect. How many personal examples of poor on-the-job communication can you come up with right now? Can you think of staff developers who were ineffective? A particular workshop that bombed? Principals whose choice of words regularly antagonized or angered the staff? A presenter with a bizarre tic that you remember to this day? Teachers on the team who just rubbed each other the wrong way because of their communication style? What am I missing? I bet you have many examples of situations where the listeners just didn't get it . . . and it was the messenger who deserved the blame. I'm not suggesting that improved oral communication will solve all the problems in your building or district, but I am suggesting that we can do a lot to eliminate the poor verbal exchanges that get in the way of solving those problems.

Great speaking will not change your school culture, and this book doesn't make that argument. Actions do speak louder than words, and lip service to noble goals will never suffice. Nor is my purpose to give

you slick speaking skills you can use to pull the wool over others' eyes. I only want to make sure that weak oral communication skills do not get in your way. I want you to be confident that you have presented the message you intend as powerfully and as well as possible. If the idea is rejected, it should be rejected on its merits rather than because of its presentation.

About This Book

Although most people don't think much about this, all speaking involves two distinct parts: one, preparing something to say and two, saying it. While this may seem obvious once I point it out, few people understand how profound that realization is. I can certainly think of times when I thought, "Wow, *that* was the wrong thing to say," as well as times when I thought, "That didn't come out the way I wanted it to." The first comment makes clear that I should have thought more *before* I opened my mouth. The second makes clear that the out-loud part went wrong. I can also think of times when I thought, "That was the ugliest PowerPoint I have ever seen," and times when I thought, "That speaker was impossible to listen to." Again, the first comment refers to something created *before* the talk while the second refers to how the speaker spoke. The first part of this book addresses the *before speaking* issues; the second addresses what to do *as you are speaking* to ensure a better reception.

This is a practical, experience-based book. I cite research, but I build my case on what education leaders have shared with me. You will hear from a central office leader, principals, education consultants, teachers on special assignment, instructional coaches, staff developers, and a lead counselor. These are people who have been there and faced the challenges associated with communicating with wildly diverse audiences. Together, we'll learn from their mistakes and from their successes. Every now and then, I'll insert a case study for you to ponder, and at the end of all chapters but this one, you will find a set of application exercises; some focus on the case studies, and others prompt you to connect what you've just read to your own practice.

If you have picked up this book thinking it might be for you, trust that it is. Yes, it will help you if you're an official school leader tasked with giving "leadership" talks before big audiences. Improved oral communication skills will help you when you are welcoming new students and parents at school orientation, facilitating a PLC, training teachers on how to give the state assessment, conversing in a breakout room at a conference, or sharing directives with your team, like my former colleague Tom. Strong speaking skills will also help you get more out of casual interactions with others in hallways, break rooms, and lunchrooms and turn them into opportunities for constructive communication that will positively affect school culture.

The fact is, being an effective messenger is important in nearly all education settings and all education roles. It's not important only for those in official leadership positions. Consider how the greeting delivered at a school's front desk can make or break a visiting parent's experience before a meeting or conference gets started. Remember that the counselor speaking briefly at Back to School Night may not have "leader" in her title, but as the face of the counseling department, she needs to be a competent and confident oral communicator. The concepts shared in this book will benefit these staff members and many others.

Additionally, I think the ideas here have a broad application beyond education. After all, how much of your day outside school involves speaking? Speaking is by far the number one language art and deserves much more attention than it gets. Yes, I want you to be able to craft and deliver powerful messages in the many different situations you face as a professional educator, but speaking well will benefit you wherever you are and whatever you are doing. You may need to give a toast at a bachelorette party, a eulogy at a funeral, a talk at a friend's retirement dinner, or a pep talk to your child. The suggestions here will apply to all of those situations as well.

And finally, as I wrote this book, I often thought, "But this point is obvious, isn't it? It's common sense." As you have no doubt discovered, common sense is often not common at all. If it is all so obvious, why

would we see terrible oral communication failures all around us? Why would we hear the head of a prestigious grades 6–12 prep school say, in the opening minutes of her Day One welcome-back greeting, “Please remember to flush the toilet after you use it.” (Message intended but not received: “I’m the right person to lead this school, and we are going to have a great year.”) Why would a big-name author, speaking at a national conference and eschewing PowerPoint, repeatedly walk back to her computer to add another yet another point in illegible handwriting until the screen was entirely filled with scribbling that no one in the audience could read? (Message intended but not received: “These are great ways to improve school culture.”) Why would a national organization create an instructional video in which a very dull speaker reads every word printed on every slide? (Message intended but not received: “This is a wonderful strategy that will help you in your work.”) Why would a Zoom meeting speaker not notice that everyone had a close-up view of his desk, littered with fast-food trash? (Message intended but not received: Whatever he was talking about while the viewers were evaluating his eating habits.) In each of these instances, all of which I witnessed while I was writing this book, what was obvious to me was not obvious to the messenger. And in all of these communication failures, the messenger was to blame. So, let’s get to work and learn how to be more effective messengers.

Part I

Planning the Message

In your role as a leader, coming up with a message topic is rarely a problem. Your purpose has been given to you: you must explain how the new state law affects the district, report the results of the state assessment, provide coaching on classroom management, and so on. Sure, sometimes there are options—*which funny stories do I want to tell at the Teacher of the Year Tea?*—but coming up with the topic is not usually the hard part of speaking. The bigger challenge is figuring out how to craft the message *well*. Does the opening command attention and create interest? Is all of the content meaningful and engaging? Are the words appropriate for the audience and occasion? Do the ideas flow logically? Does the closing leave a positive and lasting impression?

Because a well-crafted message has to do all these things, it's not surprising that few people are really good at impromptu speaking. It is difficult to create a talk on the spur of the moment, which is why an impromptu speech about an important matter can lead to a host of problems, ranging from misunderstanding to antagonism. We need time to come up with the right words to say. Even if we come up with the right words, ad-libbing may take us away from the intended message and open the door to foot-in-the-mouth moments.

A bumbling or boring or insensitive speech is a more serious problem for school leaders than it may seem. Consider that those you're speaking to may only hear your voice occasionally. Colleagues who have greater access to you might be able to say, "Once you get to know her,

you'll see she knows her stuff," but the rest will use just a couple of talks to decide who you are and whether to trust your leadership. Those talks better be good.

Further, school leaders need to be especially careful creating messages for the high-stakes situations they and their colleagues face. One false step, one misstatement, can lead to irate parents, disillusioned staff, ineffective professional development, and other problems you've probably witnessed in your career.

However, you know better than I do that the job demands on school leaders do not allow them to spend a massive amount of time preparing every talk. Prioritization is key. Learn to recognize which talks require more careful construction. For example, it's likely you can devote less thought and time to preparing your seventh "Welcome, New Parents!" talk than to preparing a talk for a concurrent session at a national conference or preparing what you will say at a parent meeting about a divisive and potentially explosive topic. Better to invest time up front crafting the right message *before* you speak than to spend several times longer cleaning up a mess caused by bad communication.

This section offers some guidance about what school leaders must do before they ever say a word. I offer ideas to help you think differently about the kinds of messages you need to deliver in your leadership role, formal or informal. Following these suggestions will ensure that your message is solid and worth presenting, and it will give you confidence that your message will be understood *and* well received. We will focus on four questions:

- Who will you be talking to?
- What should you say?
- What shouldn't you say?
- How should you present the message?

These are simple questions that have complex answers. Carefully thinking about and answering them will ensure that your message will be worth delivering.

Part II

Delivering the Message

When I ask teachers how the meeting or the professional development session they attended was, what response do you think I get most often?

“Boring.”

Certainly, part of that could be due to poorly *created* presentations, but I believe it’s most often attributable to poorly delivered presentations.

Ask yourself this question: Of the presentations you have loved, what percentage of that love was based on the presentation content, and what percentage was based on the presenter—how good or dynamic or memorable the presenter was on stage or on camera? Mostly the presenter, right? Even the best slides are not as memorable as a wonderful, skilled speaker. Despite this truth, the importance of delivering a message well is rarely addressed in professional training—not even for education leaders, who spend a good portion of every day communicating.

The requirements for a doctorate in educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Denver’s Morgridge College of Education (2018) are typical, I think. There are courses in history (e.g., “Foundations of Ed. History & Philosophy”), leadership (e.g., “Organizational Theory and Behavior,” “Leadership in Complex Systems”), and research and data analysis (e.g., “Introduction to Qualitative Research,” “Policy Analysis for Educational Systems”). Perhaps the university assumes that candidates got communication skills training elsewhere, earlier in their education. But scanning the course catalog for master’s degree classes reveals

nothing focused on oral communication, nor is that topic included in courses for undergraduate degrees in teacher preparation.

What about training before college? Well, look at the school you work in or the schools you serve. How many offer specific classes focused on how to speak well? Do any have a speaking curriculum, similar to the math curriculum, reading curriculum, or science curriculum? We make students talk in every class, but we rarely provide direct instruction about *how* to talk well.

Your education didn't help you, then, so can you get help on your own? Books for facilitators, trainers, and administrators offer ideas for team building, questions that can be used to facilitate discussion, design ideas for culturally sensitive instruction, and collaborative activities to use during workshops among other things. Your district's human resources department may give you wording to use when meeting with a teacher and the association representative, and the central office may have a script to help you talk about some sensitive issues. None of those, however, address the key skills needed *while* you speak. So that's what I'll do now.

Part II of this book is considerably shorter than Part I, which is not to suggest that the content is less important; it isn't. In fact, if you only have time to work on ideas presented in one part, choose this one. Improved slides will be noticed and enjoyed, but powerful delivery will be appreciated even more.

This section is shorter because I can only point you in the right direction. Here, on the page, I can't give you an example of a poorly spoken talk—you need to hear it. Likewise, I can't provide an example of exemplary delivery. Yes, I can tell you to listen to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and pay attention to how he effectively uses speed variation and brilliantly increases emotion in the last three minutes of his speech, but I can't put that audio into the book. (You can, however, visit this book's website, BeforeYouSayAWord.net, for links, model talks, and more.) Here, I'm only going to tell you what good speakers do and tell you how to practice their techniques. The hard work is up to you.

While you can change a slide design in a few minutes, you can't go from being a tolerable talker to an engaging, memorable, thrilling-to-listen-to speaker quite so quickly or easily. Growth will be incremental. Bit by bit, you will become more engaging.

There is one more point that I want to address—a concern I'd like to lay to rest. *Your job as a speaker is to communicate, not to entertain.* You don't need to be an especially energetic or charismatic orator to be successful communicator. That said, I believe all speakers can become more successful communicators, and the information I will share applies in all communication situations, not just for opening the annual August convocation of teachers.

This section will help you understand the elements of impressive delivery, the skills that must be demonstrated as you talk. We'll focus on two questions:

- What are the vocal skills you need for impressive delivery?
- What are the nonverbal aspects of impressive delivery?

Speaking better can earn you respect, increase acceptance of your ideas, and improve retention of the material you present. It will also make listeners enjoy hearing you talk and look forward to what you have to say. Let's get to work.



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About the Author



Erik Palmer is a professional speaker and educational consultant from Denver, Colorado, whose passion for speaking has been part of every one of his multiple careers. Before going into education, he was the national sales leader for a prominent commodity brokerage firm, a floor trader on a Chicago commodity exchange, and a founder of a publicly traded commodity investment firm. He left the business world and became a teacher, spending 21 years in the classroom in the Cherry Creek School District in Englewood, Colorado, primarily as an English teacher but also as a teacher of math, science, and civics.

Palmer is the author of several books, including *Well-Spoken: Teaching Speaking to All Students*, *Teaching the Core Skills of Listening and Speaking*, and *Own Any Occasion: Mastering the Art of Speaking and Presenting*. He is a program consultant for Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's English Language Arts programs *Into Reading* and *Into Literature*. He presents frequently at conferences, and he has given keynotes and led in-service training in school districts across the United States and around the world. Palmer focuses on showing teachers practical, engaging ways to teach oral communication skills and showing educational leaders how to be more effective communicators.

Palmer's educational background includes Oberlin College, University of Denver Law School, and the University of Colorado. He can be reached through his website, www.erikpalmer.net and the website devoted to this book, www.BeforeYouSayAWord.net.