



What Made Ronald Reagan “The Great Communicator”

BY C. PETER GIULIANO

Historians will argue over his record, but if there's one clear thing about Ronald Reagan's legacy it was his uncanny ability to fashion simple but powerful messages and convey them with force and believability. Where other leaders came up short, Reagan was able to lift the mood of a country.

Reagan took office at a time when the country was experiencing high interest rates, elevated inflation, sluggish growth and a raging Cold War. These problems had led to a widespread feeling of hopelessness, that America faced inevitable decline in a new era of growth limitations. Still, as Margaret Thatcher once noted, Reagan “achieved the most difficult of all political tasks: changing

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attitudes and perceptions about what is possible.”

More than anything else, it was Reagan's exceptional communication skills that enabled him to gain control of the political agenda and change the temperature of the time.

What were those skills? Reagan understood the emotional drivers of his audience. People will usually remember how you made them feel, rather than what you said. On taking office, Reagan saw that the American people were largely pessimistic about the direction the country was taking. He saw the need to replace that pessimism with optimism. He used plain language and made excellent use of images to restore people's faith in their country's prospects and in the dream of boundless opportunity built on individual effort. His famous use of the term, “It's morning in America,” was one such device used with great effect.

Reagan never made a pretense of having scientific

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knowledge or a grasp of policy details. He understood that when you want to impact people's opinions and their state of mind, you need to give them more than information alone; you must use emotional drivers. It's in reaching people emotionally as well as intellectually that enables a leader to persuade, motivate, change perspective or otherwise guide people to a desired outcome.

Reagan saw himself as a big-picture president. He focused on ways to appeal to people's emotions — their feelings more than their intellect. However differently people may judge him, the fact is that he was adept at connecting on an emotional level.

In some ways, Reagan's challenge was similar to that faced by today's corporate leaders. For all the demands placed on these leaders, their basic task remains: getting everyone in the organization to buy into their vision and business goals. How do they convince their key constituents — employees, shareholders, customers, the public and others — that their strategies are sound and that they have the vision, know-how and skills to deliver? No less an authority than IBM's former CEO Lou Gerstner said it best: "You've got to appeal to people's emotions. They've got to buy in with their hearts and beliefs, not just their minds." In short, people respond when they're motivated to do so, and that happens when a leader speaks to both their emotional and rational mind.

Reagan used stories and symbols to simplify complex issues. Storytelling is an important tool for leaders who want to connect emotionally with their constituents. Leaders achieve their effectiveness largely through the stories they relate. These stories have a central theme with which groups can readily identify and agree. They're stories that help people frame future decisions.

Reagan once said his stories worked because his words "came from the heart of a great nation — from our experience, our wisdom and our belief in the principles that have guided us for two centuries."

Reagan's State of the Union speeches always contained at least a few stories of ordinary people doing extraordinary things. When he introduced his heroes in the balcony, it was done as part of a storytelling technique the former actor had long ago mastered. Reagan even used stories in meetings with foreign leaders, reducing complex policy issues to a simple, straightforward presentation of his views.

Strong leaders are good at telling the kind of stories that motivate people and get them lined up behind a vision. They tell the kind of stories that create pictures in the listeners' minds and have emotional impact. They also embody their

stories. They reinforce their stories through their example.

Reagan was a master of clear, concise, credible communication. Reagan was always certain about his purpose. He maintained a sure vision of America and what he wanted to accomplish. He kept his messages short and clear. His speeches were not laden with more facts and data than people could quickly and easily absorb. If he had been a corporate CEO, his vision of what he wanted his company to achieve and how he wanted it to behave would have been clear.

Reagan, a former Democrat who had voted three times for Franklin Roosevelt and admired him, learned from his predecessors. There was Roosevelt's memorable declaration that "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." That statement was much more than just a sound bite. It was a classic example of how to communicate a critical message in the clearest, most concise and, consequently, the most memorable way. A refrain that became a frequent punch line of Reagan's 1980 campaign speeches — "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?" — was an example of Reagan's use of the same technique. A prominent Democratic rival once said: "Reagan was politically successful because he has core values and ideas and expresses them clearly and to the point."

Reagan often credited his political success to an empathy with ordinary Americans. Asked once what Americans saw in him, Reagan replied: "Maybe they see themselves, and that I'm one of them. I've never been able to detach myself or think that I, somehow, am apart from them." According to a close Reagan associate, this was not a pose. "Much of life is psychological, and it is Reagan's genius that he convinced himself and others that he was not really a politician, which inspired trust in him," this colleague said.

Many people felt comfortable about Reagan and believed him. That came first. As a result, they were more likely to listen to what he had to say. He exuded sincerity. For the most part, even his detractors did not doubt his belief in the virtues that he extolled. He instinctively knew how to channel that sincerity through the use of plain, concise language with both emotional impact and intellectual content.



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