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“The Imperatives of Leadership and Values: Research Guides for Presidential and Corporate Campaigns”

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Thank you, Jack Bergen, for that kind introduction.

I am told by my friend, Stephen Kaye, that all but one President since and including Lincoln has addressed groups here in this very room. I am honored to be in this room. I am honored to have the opportunity to speak to the members and friends of the Institute for Public Relations Research and Education, and to be in the company of the pioneers and heroes of this honorable profession.

In my view, there has never been a time when research can play a more valuable role in assisting those in public relations to get the right message out, to the right group, at the right time than now. That's because, very simply, it's more difficult to communicate now.

Communication Challenges of the 1990s

Over the last few years there has been a tremendous proliferation of media channels and a corollary explosion in the number of messages all of us hear and see. No longer do Americans tune in to just the three major networks, but cable television has opened literally hundreds of TV channels to the television viewer. Furthermore, we are told that Americans are exposed to an average of 300 different advertising messages a day, and that there now are almost 90,000 interest groups who have formed one kind of association or another to take their voice into the marketplace of ideas.

The consequence of these three relatively new phenomena has generated an audience of listeners and viewers, who not only have more options as to what they "*tune in to*," but also an audience that can "*tune out*." Our audiences have developed a communication callous -- an ability to screen out and buffer themselves from messages that do not seem important or relevant to them personally. Furthermore, the public is not certain who can be believed.

In this communication environment, individuals seek and employ a new language of simplified cues and symbols to make complex judgments about presidents, pastas and pesticides. Research can help public relations professionals understand how to cut through the communications callous and get their message heard.

I would like to focus my remarks this evening on two research findings: the first relates to leadership imperatives and the second to values. Both may shed some light on how we can communicate better in an increasingly complex and convoluted environment.

Communications in the Political Arena

While less than five percent of our business at The Wirthlin Group is in the political arena, politics has provided a marvelous communication laboratory for us. In short, our experience in the political battles has been to us what sweet peas were to the geneticist Gregor Mendel.

Political campaigns are short, lasting most cases between only 60 and 90 days. There is little time for any major intervening events to obscure the process of how voters decide. The messages used by the two campaigns are obvious and well-known, and the results are unequivocal.

The political arena generates a need to understand both the message and the messenger... both the vehicles of persuasion and the power of leadership.

Clearly then, leadership imperatives can be considered in the context of the present presidential campaign. But I also will apply some of these observations more broadly to develop a universal frame of reference that hopefully will give some insight into corporate leadership and the development of effective corporate communications, by linking them to leadership and values. So, let me first turn to a brief review of the status of the presidential campaign.

The Presidential Campaign of 1992

With the November election less than 40 days away, the mood among voters remains sullen. This month, 80 percent say that things in the country have seriously gotten off on the wrong track.

September marks the eleventh consecutive month that the "wrong track" figure has been above 70 percent. Only 16 percent this month say that things are heading in the right direction.

Pocketbook concerns over the last few months have increased sharply from 37 percent, who said in June the economy was the issue they worry most about, to 56 percent who do so today.

This time last year, President Bush enjoyed a 70 percent approval rating. However, the President's approval rating has slipped 31 percentage points since September 1991 and now stands at only 39 percent.

And more hold Bush responsible for our economic situation than Congress.

Without question, Bill Clinton would be elected president of the United States if the election were held today. Our national survey taken in early September reflects the results of the other surveys taken since the two men won their parties' nominations. Two weeks ago, in a head-to-head contest, Clinton wins 56 percent to 39 percent.

But the race might be tightening, with Bush lagging the challenger by only nine points, according to Monday's ABC/Washington Post Survey. However, just a few hours ago, CNN issued results of a study taken Wednesday that included Ross Perot on the ballot that gave Clinton an 18 percent lead with 53 percent of the vote to Bush's 35 percent, seven percent backing Perot.

With Ross Perot re-entering the race actively, he will likely finish third and will not garner enough votes to throw the election into the House of Representatives. Of every 10 Perot voters, five come from Clinton's base and four from Bush's.

However, poll readings in September, before a November presidential election, are about as stable as *feathers* in a *tornado*.

From the sixth of October 1980 to Election Day, the vote shifted 16 points to Ronald Reagan; and from mid-September 1988 to Election Day, the vote shifted 10 points to George Bush.

If poll results are poor leading indicators, what then should we watch?

Both recent and past research suggests that the election for the highest office in the land turns on a single key question considered by many voters in the closing days of the campaign.

"Which of the candidates really can best lead our country?"

Incumbent presidents, especially those who have had the opportunity on the world scene to demonstrate judicious use of power, almost always enjoy a leadership advantage. Few challengers have held positions that match a standing president's on experience and leadership. Our recent survey shows that President Bush had leveraged the Gulf War crisis and other global leadership opportunities to his advantage.

Bush holds a huge 49 percent perceptual lead over Clinton in *"dealing with an international crisis,"* a 29 percent lead on *"being a better Commander-in-Chief,"* and a 13 percent lead on *"dealing with a national crisis."*

However, Clinton holds a strong advantage over Bush on the issues of creating jobs and dealing with health care.

Six Leadership Imperatives

These leadership traits are important, but to track the electoral ebb and flow more broadly and, we believe, more accurately, let us consider the six imperatives of leadership that not only provide the most stable guides to the course of this volatile election, but also can serve as guides to understand corporate change and communication as well.

One of the research findings points to that fact that for most corporations' image is determined both by what goods or services are provided as well by the persona, or the personal image, of the

corporation. That image includes both rational and emotional components, many of which can be expressed in human terms. Market equity for a corporation strengthens when the corporation and its spokespersons become viewed as "leaders." Hence, leadership imperatives can serve as both research guides for presidential campaigns and for driving a more positive corporate image.

Imperative One: Leaders Are Honest

The first imperative of leadership is honesty. Its cousins: integrity and sincerity. Honesty pays the greens fee that allows a leader to get into the tournament. Without honesty and integrity a leader remains isolated in the club house, out of the game.

While the Bush campaign has made extensive efforts since almost the beginning of the campaign to generate a "*credibility gap*" between Bush and Clinton through issues such as Clinton's draft status, that effort to date has yielded modest results.

Among those who tell us that the phrase "*has a high degree of integrity*" describes either Bush or Clinton extremely well, Bush enjoys just a nine percent advantage over Clinton on this axial imperative.

Imperative Two: Leaders Provide Vision

A leader must articulate his goals in visionary terms and the leader's goals must be shared by those who follow, especially when those goals call for sacrifice.

The political and corporate worlds today are more turbulent, complex and non-linear than ever. Things do not always happen as they happened even yesterday. Hence, the vision must be unique. It cannot simply be a re-hash of things of the present and near past.

Warren Bennis, who has written broadly and with great insight into "leadership," quotes Wallace Stevens, a renowned poet who was also a vice president of an insurance company,

"Six Significant Landscapes"

*Rationalists, wearing square hats,
Think, in square rooms,
Looking at the floor,
Looking at the ceiling.
They confine themselves
to right-angled triangles.
If they tried rhomboids,
Cones, waving lines, ellipses-
As, for example, the ellipse
of the half-moon-
Rationalists would wear sombreros.*

To paraphrase Bennis, *"It's time for America's leadership to trade in its hard hat on a sombrero or a beret."*¹

Americans presently give Clinton a six percent edge on the imperative, *"has a clear vision as to where he would lead the country."*

Imperative Three: Leaders Care

The third imperative for leaders is to show that they care, through both their words and their actions

Giving praise generously, dealing with others as you would like to have them deal with you, and saying *"thank you"* reflect a caring leader. Willingness to listen is another crucial facet of caring. What we have found in presidential politics holds true in other arenas as well: The winning campaign is not always the campaign that makes the fewest mistakes, rather it is the one that recognizes its mistakes and corrects them most quickly. This can only happen when the leader takes time to stop and listen actively, as well as remain open to opposing viewpoints.

Most importantly, followers must believe the leader has their best interests at heart. The public senses when a leader, especially a President or a CEO, understands them and their problems and cares enough to help them meet their needs.

Many voters today believe that even a barrier, like a Congress controlled by the opposition party, should not stand in the way of a President who truly cares.

President Bush does not get high marks for *"caring about people."* The electorate rates him 17 percent below Bill Clinton on the dimension *"cares about people like me."* Bush also trails Clinton by a wide margin of 33 percent when we ask which candidate *"understands the problems of average Americans."*

Imperative Four: Leaders Are Strong

The fourth imperative of leadership is strength and consistency. In order to focus energies and assets and marshal the support of those who follow, a leader must be consistent and keep focused. This does not mean that a leader runs blindly down a particular path. It does mean that a leader stays the course when blown by countervailing winds.

No leader, past or current, reflects absolute consistency in his or her actions. But guided by their own moral compasses, by their own principles and values, leaders who develop a foundation of consistency and strength will find that it serves them well, whether in the Oval Office or in the board room.

In short, strength gives leaders grace under fire.

Bush and Clinton receive equal ratings (of 28 percent each) among the electorate for being *"strong and consistent."*

Imperative Five: Leaders Turn the Dream Into Reality

The ultimate test of a leader, whether it is the President of the United States or the CEO of a multinational corporation, is that leaders must induce positive change in the lives of those they serve. Voters in particular want a president who will use the dream to change things for the better.

As the psychologist, Jung, said: “A *dream not understood remains a mere occurrence. Understood, it becomes a reality. Experienced, it becomes a part of your personal life.*”

Bill Clinton holds, at this juncture, a modest three percent edge over Bush in “*accomplishing what he sets out to do.*”

Imperative Six: Leaders Epitomize Shared Values

Leaders must exemplify and support the values of those they hope to lead. This begins by articulating, in both verbal and nonverbal ways, the values that bind a group together.

Once shared values are defined, leaders must show they embrace those values in their own lives and successfully embed them in their policies and programs.

The President tried earlier this year to demonstrate to Americans that he shared their values by using “*family values.*” However, by trying to characterize values too narrowly as “*family values*” in this election, the Republicans have succeeded only in clouding the issue in the minds of voters. As a result, neither candidate holds an advantage. When we ask, “*Which of the candidates would best exemplify your personal values,*” 47 percent say Bill Clinton, compared to 44 percent for George Bush.

Persuade by Reason, Motivate by Tapping into Values

If honesty and integrity pay the greens fee for those who would lead, then this last imperative -- epitomizing shared values -- provides the communication lynch pin to those leaders who would articulate an effective message.

At the beginning of my remarks I indicated that I would focus on two types of strategic research that can enhance a wide array of public relations services. Recognizing the underpinnings of leadership imperatives can provide a strategic frame of reference for many corporations and, clearly, for presidential campaigns. But let me take this one step further. Understanding how to embed a values component in both paid and earned communications can make the difference between *changing behavior* among your key stake holders and just *talking at them*.

The Ronald Reagan Experience

I first suspected that there was more to good communication than just good words during my early experiences with Ronald Reagan.

In the early 1970s, I sensed that Ronald Reagan's political strength went beyond issues and went beyond what was then termed as image. And even though we knew in 1979 when Ronald Reagan

was preparing to run for the Presidency that most incumbents almost always win, I felt Governor Reagan could be elected if we could identify, expand and leverage that "extra something." After considerable review of the decade of attitudinal data I gathered for him when he served as Governor, I concluded that his "extra something" was his ability to relate his issues, his policies and his persona to those values that strongly and emotionally turned many independents and Democrats toward his Republican banner.

In February of 1980, Ronald Reagan said to me, "Dick, we're going to change our campaign assignments. I want you to develop the campaign strategy for the fall general elections." The numbers that then flashed before my eyes were 51 and 28. At that juncture, 51 percent of Americans considered themselves Democrats and only 28 percent considered themselves Republican.

The second thing that occurred to me was that since the early fifties, winning the South and convincing large numbers of Southern Conservative Democrats to vote for a Republican presidential candidate was the only way Republicans had won the presidency. But that road to the White House was blocked. *Georgian* Jimmy Carter, by birth, owned the South.

It was then we decided to run a values-based campaign that would use issues and their consequences to persuade rationally and, then, by leveraging these consequences, tap into the key values that we believed would emotionally motivate the electorate to support Ronald Reagan. "Family," "neighborhood," "workplace," "peace" and "freedom" became the key issue-image-values components that structured Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign victory.

Since 1980 we have refined considerably the measurement and the application of values in developing communications strategy. But the paradigm we apply to communications strategy today is precisely the same as the one we used in 1980.

I'm sure most of you in this room have your own definition of communications strategy, but here is mine:

Communications Strategy

A predetermined set of action steps that:

- differentiate your product, candidate or corporation from your competition
- in positive and personally relevant terms
- among your key stakeholders.

There is not much that is new in this definition except perhaps the emphasis it gives to what might be called the strategic hinge, in the importance of binding your corporation, or client, or product, or issue with your target audiences in positive and personally relevant ways.

We've found that the best hinge consists of two distinct parts:

- The first is the rational, concrete component.
- The second is the emotional, value-based component.

In short, good communication does two things:

- Persuades by reason and
- Motivates through emotion.

But, what in this setting do we mean by values?

Values are the enduring yardsticks by which people measure the worth and importance of things in their lives.

Hence, values remain quite stable.

Values, being emotionally charged, are more likely to determine action than attributes of a product, or service, or issue.

Values must be separated from that which is valued. For example, "family" is not a value, but it is valued. "Love," "security" and "self-esteem" are the values which make the family important. Values are shaped by culture, geography and demography, family, expectations and beliefs, and personal experience.

And how do values work?

Understanding values allows us to determine what drives the behavior of different segments of the population. Understanding values show us:

- What is central to an individual's decision-making process;
- What has the most influence in a person's life; and, most importantly;
- What the underlying reasons are.

But in using values to construct an effective message you must watch two things carefully.

First, you must reference values with a great deal of sensitivity.

In many instances you should not articulate values explicitly, but do so inferentially and through symbols, cues and metaphors.

This is particularly true of closely held values like religious and patriotic values.

Most observers agree that personal and family values could have been President Bush's strongest advantage in this campaign. After all, almost six out of 10 Americans over 25 are married and have children. They tend to be more conservative and Republican than the population at large and do reflect more strongly what might be generally called "traditional values." I do believe "family values" could have been a useful theme to pursue, but in our experience, messages which most successfully touch people's deeply-held values rarely use the word "values" at all.

The "values" strategy may well have backfired on the President because he and Vice President Quayle attempted to hammer values too explicitly and may have chosen the wrong symbol -- Murphy Brown. By turning "family values" into a political mantra, the Republicans placed themselves in the unenviable position of defining "family values" in narrow and exclusive terms. By choosing to define family values in terms of anti-lifestyles, the Republicans lost the opportunity to articulate family values in positive terms, such as togetherness, love, self-esteem and accomplishment.

All of these values could have been tied to and grounded in Bush's policies and programs which would have given strength and coherence to the values component.

The second caution in developing values-based messages is that you must always link your product's attributes and consequences to values in highly credible ways.

You cannot simply talk about values without logical, credible links to attributes or issues.

Values Lend Personal Relevance

In summary, consider these two questions: *"Why do values provide an efficacious way to cut through the communication callous?"* And, *"Why are values of particular worth in a volatile communications environment?"*

You really can't change behavior in a significant and enduring way, in my view, without tapping into emotions and values. Thus, values hold the best promise of cutting through today's complex communications environment. Also, values themselves endure. Even when most things have changed, values remain solid anchors you can count on.

The Need for Focus

The last point that I would like to make is simply this: Given the communication overload of which I spoke earlier, you as communicators and public relations professionals, simply face too many choices. When you consider the development of the "right" communications message to be effective, you must decide on just the three to five strategic imperatives that will make the biggest differences in your communication campaigns and then implement those. By concentrating your efforts on leadership imperatives and values as they relate to issues or product attributes, they will help you focus on the things that count.

What can we say about both this presidential campaign and corporate change, and leadership? Time now imposes the ultimate constraint on the presidential campaign, but four weeks can be an eternity in politics. Much can change between now and November third.

Without question, new information -- both positive and negative -- about the candidates will emerge over the next four weeks.

The impact of a resurrected Perot campaign, while unlikely to throw the election into the House of Representatives, will almost certainly change the pattern of voting in some key states if Ross Perot aggressively campaigns in these states with paid media.

The course and consequence of the debates will influence how Americans assess these three candidates in light of the leadership imperatives in the closing days of the campaign.

How the campaigns themselves are focused and managed will also make a difference.

No one knows the ultimate impact of these kinds of changes on the final vote. However, it is almost certain that the gap of 16 points could narrow and could narrow rapidly, given that 51 percent of the electorate is not yet strongly committed to either of the major candidates.

While it is impossible to say today what will finally tip the scale for the individual voter, it is clear that at this time the scale is firmly tipped in Clinton's favor.

If Bush is going to be reelected, he needs to bolster the belief among more Americans that he does have a clear vision as to where he would lead the country and that he will be able to turn that vision into reality.

At the same time, he must aggressively and directly trim Clinton's support by keeping the focus on the leadership imperative of honesty and integrity and do so in a manner that will not undercut his own support.

This is a monumental task for the President, but one he must accomplish if he is not to become like Jimmy Carter -- the only modern U.S. President who didn't give an address in this room -- a one-term president.

Corporate leaders must heed these same leadership imperatives if they are to lead effectively. They must demonstrate not only integrity and strength, but also genuine caring. They need to communicate a compelling vision -- based on shared goals -- of where they want to lead the organization and persuade followers that they can turn that shared vision into reality. But ultimately, leaders fulfill their stewardship most directly by bringing about positive changes in the lives of those they serve.

At a time when very little that comes, stays, always remember the two compelling dimensions of presidential and corporate communications -- the positioning power of leadership imperatives and the vitality of values communication. These two will remain constant in an ever changing environment. Strategies that link concrete attributes to the appropriate values will receive more universal and sustained acceptance, they will set the right context by using the right symbols for the right groups and deliver the right message. They will change behavior. And, for me, that's what good public relations is all about.

In this room, where Lincoln spoke, it is appropriate to recall that it was said of him that, "As a youth he split logs with a single well-aimed blow from his ax. Later in life, the sharp edge of his

prose found its mark just as efficiently, laying the truth bare with poetic, resounding whacks." ²
May that also be said of such of us who practice this honorable profession of public relations.

References

¹Warren Bennis; *On Becoming a Leader*, Addison Wesley Publishing Company, Inc. page 24.

²Gerard Parshall, Who Was Lincoln, *U.S. News and World Report*, October 5, 1992, page 78.