
----- WHAT'S UP, DOC? -----

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"Creating Leadership Solutions for Profit and Growth"

THIS MONTH'S THEME: LEADERSHIP IN A MEDIA AGE

Satellite TV. Twenty-four hour cable news. Reality television. Weblogs. Blogs. Magazines. Radio. Video-on-demand. DSL. MTV. DVD. HDTV . . . It's a truism to say that we live in an unprecedented information age, but very few people stop to look at how this age, and the challenges it brings, change the ways we think and process information, both as individuals and as groups. And more to the point, how do those changes influence how we must behave as leaders? What are the implications for those of us who seek to have a positive impact on others?

That's the topic of this month's edition of "What's Up, Doc?" - once again offering unique, original content you can find nowhere else. Please forward this issue to a friend!

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THIS MONTH'S QUOTES:

People of influence, and even media executives, have had all kinds of reactions to the media:

"The sources of information are the springs from which democracy drinks." -- Adlai E. Stevenson, 1956.

"The press is the enemy." -- Richard M. Nixon, as recalled by William Safire, published 1975.

"Journalism is in fact history on the run." -- Thomas Griffith, 1959

“The single biggest problem of television is that everyone talks so much.”
– Roone Arledge, 1977.

1. MODERN MEDIA CHANGE THE WAYS WE THINK

WE THINK IN “PICTURE” BITES

You’ve heard of “sound bites?” Those quick, effective sentences or words that sum up an argument on television or in political campaigns? An example in the United States would be when our current President summed up his political philosophy as “compassionate conservatism.” Sound bites matter a lot, but what I call “picture bites” matter even more. A famous political “picture bite” example came during the campaign of Michael Dukakis in 1988, when he rode, helmeted, in a tank, and looked about as genuine as . . . what? Maybe an Elvis impersonator. Anyway, a picture has always been worth a thousand words, but as we become more and more saturated by images and round-the-clock cable or satellite television, pictures count more than ever. They influence our “rational” beliefs more than we might care to understand or admit. More and more, we process information through pictures.

CONCLUSIONS BEFORE EVIDENCE

Pictures – especially emotionally evocative ones – compel us in ways that logically driven arguments do not. As a result, we can easily become inclined to draw conclusions before we have had a chance to think things through, or to imagine other causes or reasons for the situations or events we observe. As a result, we can become more driven in a media age to seek out arguments to support the beliefs we already hold, after feeling moved in some direction by the images we’ve seen. With so many demands on our senses, we may take less time for rational, considered judgment, and so we draw conclusions more quickly just to keep up with all the demands we experience on our senses.

CYCLES AND WAVES

You can see this in the news, and it happens in companies as well. First, there is the opening take on an event, which becomes the overwhelming prevailing wisdom. Then the pendulum swings the other way, and continues to do so in perhaps smaller and smaller arcs until another, dramatic compelling story takes its place. If there is no real story to take its place, then speculation may become a story and take its place.

I’ve seen this happen in a company for whom I consulted that was reorganizing. There was the initial belief that a change project could not

be done, and then there was the counter-belief among some that said the skeptics were being irrational. Then, as the project moved toward success, there was belief that there would be a series of layoffs that had never been contemplated or planned, based on pure speculation, as if to fill in the vacuum. The prevailing wisdom can ebb and flow like the tide, even within a company.

CONDENSED TIME FRAMES

In a media age, these cycles occur much faster than they used to. In an office environment, as in my example above, the cycle took a period of a few short weeks. In the popular media, cycles can happen in a matter of days, and sometimes within a given day. The flood of images and rumors in the media condense the time frames through which these changes in perception occur, because there are more things, pictures or words in the environment to stimulate us, all the time.

AMPLIFICATION EFFECTS

Notice how the capitalized text stands out on this page? That's nothing compared to the amplification effects we observe in the media. Repetition of rumor and speculation, sometimes from unnamed sources, becomes virtual truth, even if there was very little truth to the rumor in the first place. In a media age, we have all become more numb to very loud messages, repeated over and over again, and so it can take more to get people's attention in a meaningful way. In addition, media outlets seem to confer credibility to messages that may or may not have foundation. As a result, it can be easy for groups of people to focus only on the loudest, most persistent messages they encounter, regardless of their merit.

INCREASED SKEPTICISM AND RESERVE BY INDIVIDUALS . . . BUT NOT BY GROUPS

For all these reasons, individual people tend to take fewer things that they hear at face value. Groups, however, do not behave quite the way individuals do, as psychologists and advertising executives have long known. There is an interesting dichotomy here: while individuals are more skeptical, given the flood of rumor and information they receive, groups tend to be less critical. And when you speak to individuals one on one, more skepticism comes through, but when these same people are engaged as part of a wider group, they are more impulsive and reactive. The same thing happens, on a less intense level, when it comes to organizational rumors that are not necessarily media events.

NOT GOOD OR BAD – JUST DIFFERENT

It's fashionable for some people to say that we live in a "dumber" age, as if this media flood has made us less intelligent. Some statistics may suggest we read less, or have weaker math scores in the U. S., but I think we simply and necessarily process the data and information we get

differently now, since we live in a different environment. We may perhaps read less, but we are much more savvy about information and sophisticated kinds of persuasion than previous generations have been. I don't think there ever was a "golden age" of rationality, and having good judgment is about more than just the ability to think through and explain a logical argument.

There are plenty of people who may not be able to explain their gut reactions to some things who can nevertheless make much better judgments than those of us who occasionally can explain all sides of some issue. Education does not guarantee wisdom, and there is more to intelligence than "book smarts." We may sometimes behave like a large herd as we follow the currents of the media, but the herd mentality itself is nothing new. It's not always bad, either, when it gets people to "panic" and work together to discover a cure for SARS or even AIDS, for example.

2. IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS

THE PROXIMITY EFFECT

No individual leader can hope to compete against a media firestorm, or seek to control one. And even in an organization, rumors and speculation can move and flow like the weather. But capable leaders do have an advantage, and it lies in the proximity effect: the closer you are to having contact with people, and an opportunity to look others in the eye, the more power you have to set the tone and create a baseline of understanding that is less susceptible to wild movements and turns.

Interactions with groups matter. Interactions with groups of people fewer than eight at a time matter even more (psychologists have long observed differences in behavior and dynamics when that numerical threshold is crossed). And as clichéd as it may seem to be, one-on-one interactions matter most. Leaders can amplify the effectiveness of these one-on-one interactions when they move beyond their own immediate circles to have contact others at key nodes in an organization, or with those whose jobs or personalities put them in touch with other diverse groups of people. This kind of outreach multiplies the power of one on one interactions.

TRUTH, TRUTH, TRUTH

It can't be said enough: tell the truth. People are more and more aware of so-called "non-denial denials," of apologies that essentially say "I'm sorry you were upset," which evade personal responsibility, and all sorts of

evasions and obfuscations. When you don't know, say you don't know, and maybe say why you don't know or when you think you will be able to give an answer. But don't fudge, because you won't fool anyone in the long term. Be known as one who is honest and you can lead large numbers of people through real firestorms, no matter what the conditions, rumors or popular fears may be.

BENEFITS OF A LOW PROFILE

Now, I am often the first to advise my executive clients in large corporations to make use of their opportunities to be seen and heard at important times and events, and to make use of their more or less "symbolic" opportunities to send a needed message throughout an organization – as long as these acts are genuine ones. But I suspect that, in this media age, and at this time when we've seen corporate executives led out of office buildings in handcuffs, there are great benefits to keeping a reasonably low profile – communicating more through actions than through grand strokes. Making too many "broadband" appearances, sending too many memos and blast emails - all these things cheapen the currency of communication. I sense that, in the U. S. at least, people have a greater taste these days for a lower profile in their leaders, perhaps in part as a reaction to the ways popular media shout for our attention all the time.

WHEN TO GO "HIGH PROFILE"

Here are some guidelines: be visible when there is an event that either 1) celebrates a notable division or person, 2) gathers significant parts of the organization together for any reason, 3) when there is a "blizzard," 4) when there is a crisis or perceived crisis. The first two points and the fourth are well understood and commonly recognized. Let me explain the third: in Washington, D. C., we recently had an uncommonly heavy blizzard, and at the time, the mayor of D. C. was on vacation in the Caribbean. Now, the process of snow removal (something D. C. does not do well) would have been equally good or bad without him, but a previous mayor lost an election in part because he had been out of town when there was a blizzard, and snow removal had gone very badly in his absence.

What's the point? During an event that affects people directly, or inconveniences or stresses them, the leader need to be present and visible, whether or not the leader has a substantive role to play in the outcome. I recently consulted to an organization whose leader was unfortunately at Disney Land with family when the organization's Board announced some emotionally charged cutbacks in staff. There was nothing the leader could have done to make the process better directly, but nevertheless took a credibility hit for being absent, even though the family vacation had been planned months in advance. This executive was absent for the "blizzard."

CONSISTENCY IS KEY

Consistency has always been important in leadership, though in today's economy, we know that change seems at times to be the only constant, and adaptability separates the winners from the losers in a Darwinian marketplace. The key to leadership consistency nowadays is to maintain, and even perhaps articulate, a few core goals and values that are unlikely to change in any material way, and to promote them, in deed and in word (in that order) every day. The constant noise of media messages stresses people, so a working environment that operates from a still, confident place, rooted in values and consistent behaviors from the top, can buy a lot of loyalty and promote exceptional performance, outpacing the competition.

INCLUDE CRITICS IN YOUR INNER CIRCLE

It's better to have allies point out to you when you are doing something, well, dumb. . . than to do it and make a big mess. The strongest leaders surround themselves with other strong and talented people, and actively seek out contrary points of view in order to test their potential actions before taking action. In a media age, when employees or markets can amplify rumors, information or mistakes quickly – through email, message boards, weblogs and other outlets - the price of being surrounded by “yes” people is just too high.

KEEP A SENSE OF HUMOR

You'll never be able to control people's reactions or opinions, but you can influence people – especially over the long term – by taking wise, consistent and honest action. There will be ups and downs, but remember: have some fun, enjoy the bumpy rides that come along, and people will appreciate that you don't take yourself too seriously. You'll feel a lot better, too, and your family and friends will be grateful for your ability to keep perspective and not react to every blip and bump in popular perception. Life is short – enjoy it!

3. RECOMMENDED BOOKS AND FILMS

BOOK: "Great Comedians Talk About Comedy," by Larry Wilde, Executive Books, Mechanicsburg, PA, 2000.

Speaking of keeping a sense of humor. . . this book includes a series of interviews with some of the most renowned comedians of our American past, including Johnny Carson, Phyllis Diller, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, George Burns, Bob Hope, Danny Thomas and one modern era addition,

Jerry Seinfeld. All of these people talk about the craft of comedy, what they've learned, how they have been successful. . . very interesting stuff. This is not a joke book, though there are laughs along the way. This is a book of professionals talking about the art and craft of their professions. Highly, highly recommended.

FILMS: The American Film Institute's Top 5 Comedies

I saw no new release movies during the last month, and I thought I might stay with the comedy theme here and suggest some options for rental. The American Film Institute lists the following five films as its top comedies: 1. Some Like It Hot (1959); 2. Tootsie (1982); 3. Dr. Strangelove (1964); 4. Annie Hall (1977); 5. Duck Soup (1933). That might not be my exact list, but I might add The Producers (1968, AFI number 11), It's Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World (AFI number 40) and The Jerk (AFI number 89) among some other personal favorites (sheesh, that list makes me sound older than I am!).

4. CHUCKLES

MOTHERS ALWAYS KNOW

A man excitedly told his mother he'd fallen in love and was going to get married.

He told her, "Just for fun, Mom, I'm going to bring over two other female friends in addition to my fiancée, and you have to try and guess which one I'm going to marry."

The next day, he brought 3 beautiful women into the house and sat them down on the couch, where they all chatted together for a while.

He then said, "Okay, Mom. Guess which one I'm going to marry."

She immediately replied, "The red-head in the middle."

"That's amazing! You're right, how did you know?"

His mother folded her arms across her chest, frowned, and said, "Because I don't like her."

5. BOOK ANNOUNCEMENT

Forthcoming Book:

ChangeRx: Prescriptions for Successful Change Planning and Implementation - A Practical Guide for Leaders, by A. J. Schuler, Psy. D.

Anticipated for publication in the Fall of 2003, "ChangeRx" will be the only practical guide of its kind to walk change leaders through the actual process of designing and implementing a successful change campaign. The book, designed and formatted as an easily accessible workbook, will be an ideal resource for students of management, executives and leaders of organizations large and small, both in the profit and non-profit sectors.

To be placed on the notification list - to learn right away when ChangeRx" will become available - simply email me at AJ@SchulerSolutions.com with the subject heading, "ChangeRx." By doing so, you will have the opportunity to purchase "ChangeRx" at 20% off the retail price. You will also be able to receive free sample text online once the content becomes available. Don't miss this chance to get in on a good thing - "ChangeRx" is destined to become a "cult classic" among leaders of change and required reading for the executive teams of large organizations under transition.

6. ABOUT DR. SCHULER

A. J. Schuler, Psy. D., an expert on leadership and organizational change, provides consulting services, keynote presentations and seminars for clients companies. His trademark is highly personalized service that leads to measurable increases in productivity, profit and growth.

Dr. Schuler, President of Schuler Solutions, Inc., has served diverse organizations in the private and public sectors, including The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, Sony Development, Nomura Securities and the Executive Office for Immigration Review.

A graduate of the Wharton School of Business, Dr. Schuler has successfully led the profitable growth of a dynamic, international consulting firm while serving as Operations Director, and has successfully coached over five hundred CEO's and corporate executives.

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8. NEWSLETTER STATEMENT OF ETHICS

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“Make each day your masterpiece.” -- John Wooden

P.S. - Remember to send in your comments and successes, and to forward this newsletter to at least one friend. -- AJS :-]