

“They Don’t Get It! The Democratic Candidates (Except One) Flunk Leadership Communication!”

By Brent Filson

James Buchanan said, “I love the noise of democracy!” With the next presidential election cycle beginning, the noise is on the up-tick.

Considering alternative forms of government, all noise in a democracy is good noise. However, in election campaigns, some noise is more effective than other noise. The trouble is, if the coming presidential campaign is shaping up to be anything like recent ones, the noise we will be subjected to will be thunderously ineffective.

Many millions of dollars are being poured into the campaigns; yet the candidates haven’t bought one penny’s worth of insights into fundamental truths of human motivation and communication.

If I were giving them a course on Motivational Leadership 101, every candidate (except one) would flunk. In the political arena, the message is not just the message. The message is also the messenger. Presentations communicate information, which is the message. If leadership communication was simply about putting out information, I’d have no problems with the candidates. The candidates are virtuosos at delivering presentation-like speeches. They can sure trumpet reams of information. However, leadership communication is more than presentation/speech delivery; it’s more than being a walking, talking brochure; it’s about establishing deep, emotional connections with voters. After all, you’re asking people to take action for you – vote. And people won’t take action unless their emotions are engaged. So the candidates have to connect with people in ways that presentations can’t. Leadership talks do that. But none of the candidates seem to know what a leadership talk is all about.

The candidates’ communication problems stem from their propensity to deliver communications which are more like presentations rather than what I call “leadership talks.”

The leadership talk is simply a communication from the heart that makes a deep, emotional connection with

the audience so they believe in and take ardent action for the speaker.

The leadership talk is the most powerful motivational tool of all. Events in history bear this out. Throughout history whenever a people needed to accomplish great things, whether in the realm of religion, military endeavors, political movements, human rights, etcetera, one thing had to happen: A leader had to gather them together and speak to them from the heart. That leader didn’t give a presentation. He/she really didn’t even give a speech as it is known by the candidates today. That leader gave a leadership talk. Of course, it wasn’t called a leadership talk at the time; but when you look back on it, that’s what it was. And that’s what we’re not getting from candidates.

Look at it this way: When a leader speaks, two questions hang in the air. Audiences always ask and answer those questions whether or not the speaker is aware of it. “Can you do your job, and why are you here?” The candidates make a big show of answering the first question. That’s the information they communicate about what they will do as the president. But the other question they’re not answering: Why are you here? If they don’t believe that you are there for the right reasons, you’ll lose them. That’s what a leadership talk is all about, communicating in a motivational way why you are there. Clearly, with television and political rallies, people are gathering together. But aren’t the cheering people the choir being preached to? No candidate has shown the communication ability to branch out from those people, to reach the hearts of most of the voters; and one main reason is that they haven’t been connecting by consistently speaking from the heart.

Let’s look at a few of them.

John Kerry: He comes with a distinguished war record: three purple hearts, a bronze star, a silver star. He comes with 18 distinguished years in the U.S. Senate. It was his to lose, and he almost lost it. Until Iowa, he been played catch up to Howard Dean.

One reason for his getting behind when he should've been ahead was his propensity to deliver the lowly presentation and not connect in an emotional way with the voters. All those years he's spent in the Senate (Most Senators don't know a leadership talk from a hole in the ground.) blunted his appetite to deliver a leadership talk. And he certainly once had the appetite; view footage of talks he gave when he returned from Viet Nam as an angry young man. During the past months, he found out the hard way that being "distinguished" doesn't cut it on the presidential campaign trail.

Another reason is his inveterate lack of podium joy. Giving speeches, he's got a hang dog look on his face as he rattles off all the problems in America. Sure, America has problems. Leadership isn't about running away from problems. It's about facing problems. But people respond to leaders who see the problems not, for instance, the way Jimmy Carter saw them in terms of a "national malaise" but the way Ronald Reagan did, "It's morning in America!" Joy enriches the connection between the leader and the audience especially in the most challenging times. It's a great motivator because it ratches up confidence to a sublime level. Hey, I know Kerry has joy. I've seen it when he's interacting with people one-on-one away from the podium and the mike. And in the last days of campaigning in Iowa, his back to the wall, fighting desperately not to be knocked out by Dean, he started to exhibit that joy when out in front of groups of people.

But what came to his rescue in Iowa was not just Kerry giving leadership talks but a single leadership talk, and not by him. It was delivered instead by one of his fast-boat crewmen who served with him in Nam. The man journeyed to Iowa and in front of the cameras said, "This man saved my life!" But more than words made the talk. (A leadership talk often doesn't need words.) It was the genuine emotion felt by both of the men toward each other and communicated to everyone watching. That moment, the picture of that emotion, was worth millions of dollars in campaign spending. No, that moment was priceless. You couldn't have bought it. To a great extent, the moment convinced many Iowa voters to search their political souls, the calculus being: Vote for Dean who had won their hearts because of his anti-war stance, or vote for Kerry, with his voting-for-giving-Bush-the-power-to-go-to-war baggage, but who with his war record might

be in a better position to defeat the President. They chose the latter, and the rest is history.

As Kerry rolls toward the nomination let's keep this in mind: Does he know when he's giving leadership talks and when he's not? It's bad enough not to give a leadership talk but to give a leadership talk and not know that it's a leadership talk can be almost as bad as not giving one at all. More of this "Bring it on!" and "Don't let the door hit you on the way out!", and I'll change his grade.

And now that it looks as if he's running the table -- in the polls and at the ballot boxes -- he all the more needs to be giving leadership talks. Because his biggest challenge is right ahead: As the Democratic nominee, he'll be labeled as a Massachusetts/Dukakis liberal." The only antidote to that are leadership talks, lots of them. He'd better start giving them right away -- and be conscious that he's giving them!

Howard Dean: Spunky, smart, absolutely confident, impulsive, a refreshing outsider. But has he answered the second question? Who really is Howard Dean? He hasn't told us those defining moments that made him who he is and that brought him to this point. I know of one defining moment, and it's not good. He got out of the Viet Nam war because of a bad back and within a few weeks after he got his deferment went out to Colorado and was a ski bum for a year. Sure, he's angry about the direction the Bush administration has taken the country, and he's effectively communicated that anger. His angry has unified a certain segment of angry voters. In a leadership talk you can communicate anger; but you can't communicate deeply with people through anger alone. People want to know why you here. Right now, he is like a street movie set building façade, but what's behind it -- empty air and wall-props? Dean hasn't told us in a personal way -- only in an issue way; and until he does, he's hurting himself and his supporters, because a movie-set candidate from the Northeast will stumble big time around the country. He says it, he's got one shot left: Wisconsin. It didn't have to be that way if only he had defined himself in some other way than as a dropout from an anger management class.

Wesley Clark: Like Clinton, he bootstrapped his way from Arkansas lower middle class. He was first in his class at West Point, a Rhodes Scholar, as a small-unit

commander in Viet Nam, he was awarded a purple heart and silver star; a true “water walker” career path. But now that he has entered the race, he may very well be the Trojan horse of the Democratic Party. The Republican strategists may secretly desire his nomination.

Look at it this way: In terms of the leadership talk, he is playing catch up on both questions: First, can you do the job? Clearly, Clark has a quick, tough military mind, but his misjudgements of past years -- cozying up to and swapping general’s-caps with suspected war criminal Ratko Mladic in the town of Banja Luka during the height of Bosnian civil war, almost igniting a Third World War by wanting to blunder into Russian troops at the Pristina airport during the Kosovo War, getting fired as Supreme NATO Commander, just to name a few of a long list -- make one wonder if he has the judgment for the job.

The second question, why are you here? To answer that question calls for strong belief. Strong belief is a hallmark of any leadership talk. But the issue isn’t just that the leader must have strong belief, that’s a given, but that leader must transfer that belief to the people. For a leadership talk to work, h/her belief must become the belief of the people. That transfer can’t take place if people think the leader is communicating certain beliefs just to manipulate them. In fact, if they believe that, people will feel pretty cynical about the leader. And you can’t have cynical people become your ardent cause leaders. If Clark is nominated, the Republicans can (No, they will!) show clips of his supporting Bush and Rumsfeld before the Armed Services Committee two weeks before Congress voted to give George Bush authority to wage war and contrast those with clips with his recent: “I’m very consistent. I’ve been against this war from the beginning. I was against it last summer. I was against it last fall. I was against it in the winter. I was against it in the spring. I’m against it now.” Sure, his handlers can use the bromide that his support of Bush has been taken out of context and that a leader has a right to change his mind -- but in a tight election race, the fact that people wonder about Clark may be his and the Democrats undoing.

It takes a great war to produce a great general who will give great leadership talks. Clark never got his great war, and he played a suspect role in the war he got, so

his uncertain answers to both questions may have him running the hundred yard dash of the race in concrete boots.

John Edwards: At first blush, he looks hopeless! The guy’s 50 and he looks 30, not the best look for a presidential candidate. His pretty boy looks have gotten him the moniker, “The Breck Girl” candidate. On top of what appears to be his youth and inexperience, he’s saddled with having gotten obscenely rich as a personal injury lawyer. The kind of person people love to hate. Polls show that three-fifths of Americans think lawyers are greedy and three-quarters believe they charge too much. So what’s he got going for him? One big thing: Unlike all the other candidates, the guy can give a leadership talk!

A leadership talk is not just about communication. Presentations do that. It’s just not about connection. Some speeches do that. It’s about a kind of communion between the leader and the people. Edwards proved he can give leadership talks in the 1998 senate campaign when he came out of nowhere (never having run for office before) to defeat a popular North Carolina incumbent. On top of that he ran as a centrist in a conservative state. And he ran with all the above mentioned baggage.

Edwards gives leadership talks because he comes to his talking situations fully prepared, he speaks from the heart in a low keyed, genuine way, and he doesn’t talk to people, but with people. He’d smoke President Bush in a debate, unless Bush gets quickly up to speed on leadership talks. If the Democrats are truly serious about winning this election, they have to find a spot for Edwards on the ticket. If they do, you’ll see the power of leadership talks.