

Douglass' Dilemma

Legendary CEO of General Electric Jack Welch famously said that for a manager to be successful, "You must be relentless and boring."

The statement can easily be misinterpreted. Relentless is fine, we all know that good managers must be dogged at times, incessant in offering guidance, monitoring outcomes and the processes that produce them. But what about boring? Ok, maybe in dress and lifestyle, but not when trying to lead a team. Certainly, most certainly, not in speaking and communications. After all, much of what a manager does occurs through oral expression.

Welch knew that. He told people that public speaking was a manager's second most important skill (the close first was "to make your numbers"). He told people, "You make it or lose your first thirty seconds up there." His advice was to memorize the first lines, to sharpen them and then to drive them into the hearts of the audience members. He told people to edit brutally, to cut your presentation in half after writing it. Welch called it the "Ringo Rule," citing Ringo Starr's remark that the impact of the Beatles' White Album was muted by its length and the inclusion of too many fluff pieces. He told people that boring speeches deserved the "Paper Ball Treatment," a visible rude reaction where the members of audience stand up and hurl wadded paper balls at the speaker in disapproval.

Given this, what's Welch doing telling managers that to succeed you need to be relentless and boring? The boring he referred to applies to the manager not the audience. Welch knew that in any organization of size, a manager must personally deliver an important message over and over again to many different groups. Tens, hundreds, perhaps even thousands of times. And, the message must be consistent each time to be effective. That's boring---very boring--for most managers to do, gotta be, because most managers are smart, educated, busy and worried about the future.

For Welch, the dictum carried greatest force and meaning----really determined the outcome---when it came to managing organizational culture. His full quote makes that crystal clear, "The reason managers fail at culture change is that they get bored. If you're successful, you must be two things: relentless and boring."

Over a century earlier, as he was touring cities in the Northeast giving speeches as a fugitive slave, Frederick Douglass was being given much the same advice from his abolitionist supporters. In his speeches, Douglass was talking about his personal experiences as a slave. According to his autobiography, Douglass was encouraged to, "Tell them your story, Frederick...Let us have the facts." His reaction? "It was impossible for me to repeat the same old story month after month, and to keep up my interest in it. It was new to the people, it was true, but it was an old story to me; and to go on through with it night after night was a task altogether too mechanical for my nature."

But Douglass' also objections ran deeper. While he was advised by the abolitionists to, "be yourself," he was also told that it was, "better to have a *little* of the plantation manner of speech than not; 'tis not best that you not seem too learned." He also recalls that one of his friends directed him to "give us the facts and we will take care of the philosophy."

Douglass was a very smart man and a great orator who would go on to befriend none other than Abraham Lincoln. He recognized that the advice he was given served well the abolitionist movement. But he also admits that, "I could not always obey, for I was now reading and thinking...It did not entirely satisfy me to *narrate* wrongs; I felt like *denouncing* them." This is what I call Douglass' Dilemma: Should he follow the script and say what was best for the movement, or should he adapt the script as his thinking evolved and say what was on his mind? He sums up his answer this way: "I must speak just the word that seemed to *me* the word spoken *by me*." I guess Jack Welch would have answered differently.

Sociologist Arthur W. Frank calls this statement by Douglass, "the epigraph of narrative authenticity." Indeed, social psychologist Rosanna Smith has conducted experimental research that shows people who repeat the same story are regarded by others as less sincere and less authentic. We want the story to be unique---special--when it is told to us.

Because in modern organizations we often see executives making the same speech, telling the same stories, we often make and hear similar attributions about them. They are inauthentic, they never say anything new or surprising. Suits. Yet they often are being relentless and boring. Doing what Jack Welch said to do when facing Douglass' Dilemma. Yet I don't think many—if anyone--called Welch inauthentic. No, his nickname was Neutron Jack. What's the difference?

Welch understood that every speech was a performance. While the message might be boring to someone who has heard it before, the performance was not boring. It was authentic. Like a good Broadway actor reciting the same lines night in and night out, like the Rolling Stones playing "Gimme Shelter" for 500th time, like Alex Trebek saying repeatedly every weekday for 37 years, "the answer to the question is..."

For speech to be performative, the speaker must recognize the audience, anticipate its response and craft the message accordingly, adjusting it ever so slightly mid-stream in reaction to audience perceptions. The performative speech transforms the audience. Doing it over and over again gives the speaker information, experience, and eventually the personal tools to design and adjust the message to achieve its intended effect. You better bet Jack Welch knew he would get your attention with his advice to be boring.

So, how does an executive make the cultural stump speech performative? As all speech coaches will tell you, start with a statement of purpose, tell them why you are doing this, and ideally tie that to some important or laudable goal, something it's hard to argue with. At some point, you have to break it down into smaller pieces, making clear how each serves the greater goal. The most powerful speeches are personal, they convey a story about why you think this is so important and how you came to realize that—exactly when and where and why. Present

yourself as a witness, a witness to a treasured truth. And, like any witness you need to be credible, you need to make sure that nothing you say or do conflicts with the cultural behaviors you are advocating. Ideally, you exemplify the culture.

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January 22, 2021