

A Sergeant's Communication Lesson **J. Thomas Whetstone, D.Phil.**

For the leader, communicating well is essential. It not only enables the leader to interact and accomplish anything and everything with others, but it is also the means whereby we influence others and the basis for how others see and assess us. We may be completely honorable, honest, and trustworthy, but be judged otherwise if we miscommunicate. One manner of communication is especially to be avoided by the leader, as an experienced Army sergeant once taught me.

When my company was engaged in a major field training exercise at R.O.T.C. summer camp years ago in the Pennsylvanian woods, our fire team came across a sergeant sitting in a jeep that mounted a 50 caliber machine gun. He quickly showed us the weapon. Then he asked the four of us to gather around him for a more important lesson. He asked each one of us if we ever used profanity. We each nodded affirmatively, if reluctantly.

The sergeant, who had service stripes going well up his uniform sleeve, asked us if we thought use of foul language was appropriate for an officer. We and he knew that many enlisted men swore fluently and continuously. Some seemed to use no adjectives that were not four letters long. Blankety-blank this and *%#/? that. We wondered if our men could understand our instructions and orders, especially the importance we were placing on their obedience, if we did not use profanity for emphasis. Should we not adapt to the culture and language of the men, since we were to be their leaders who needed to communicate to them in a way they would clearly understand? What is wrong with relating to the men in the manner of communication they obviously used and were accustomed to hear?

The senior sergeant then calmly, and gently, explained that even those men who use profanity constantly and profusely, and who will probably always do so, do not respect an officer who uses profanity. No matter how gallant or capable the leader is, they will never respect him as much as they would have respected him—and honored and obeyed him—if he had refrained from profane speech. Knowing this from long and widespread experience among soldiers of many backgrounds, this sergeant wanted us, as future officers, to understand it as well.

At least two of our fire team, my bunk buddy and I, seriously discussed this encounter with the sergeant. We both wanted to be effective and respected leaders. Even stronger and more immediate was our concern, and fear, that we would blurt out some off-color remark or profane term at the dinner table when we returned to our homes. We realized we had taken on the bad habit of speaking profanities, which is so very contagious. We pledged to work together for the rest of training camp, correcting each other when we misspoke, so that we would clean up our habitual language.

Communication consists of three basic components: the sender (communicator); the message (the communication); and the receiver (the one communicated to). The sergeant's point was that if a leader uses profanity in his messages, his targeted

communication receivers, including his men, will tend to lose their respect for him as a leader and communicator. They are still somehow offended by foul language, even though they use it themselves. This may be because the officer demeans them when he directs profanity at them, but shows respect for them when he communicates to them, clearly and cleanly, as the God-imagers they are. Followers will tend to honor the leader who speaks with respect to them.

The sergeant's lesson is not just applicable to military leaders; it is a universal one. When any person uses profane or off-color expressions or even tells "dirty" jokes, somehow the atmosphere changes and the level of dignity and mutual respect is degraded, as the following case illustrates.

On a visit to a company where I previously worked, I met an attractive woman M.B.A. who told stories using rough language--perhaps to show she was one of our crowd — until another person informed her that I was studying to be a minister. The woman apologized to me profusely. I told her that she in no way offended me, as I had heard it all before and was not so pure myself. However, I did note that if anyone were offended, it was God. Is it male chauvinism that causes some to be especially sensitive when a woman uses rough language in mixed company at work? Scripture does not say this is worse for a female than it is for a male; the Ten Commandments use masculine pronouns but the admonitions apply to all.

The bottom line is that the sergeant's lesson is positively beneficial. By refraining from using profanity, a leader will retain and even gain greater respect from his or her followers. Moreover, scripture teaches, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). Meeting this communication challenge is really not so difficult, it is just a matter of discipline and focus on good character.

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