

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY WITH POLITICIANS

(REMARKS MADE AT THE 2006 CAP CONGRESS HELD AT BROCK UNIVERSITY)

by Preston Manning

Thank you for the opportunity to join you today to discuss “communicating effectively with politicians.” But before doing so I should tell you a few things about my initial exposure to physics.

As a teenager I became interested for some reason in atomic physics and radiation and persuaded my parents to give me a Geiger tube and some pitchblende samples for Christmas. I hooked the tube up to an amplifier, invited my friends to hide the pitchblende samples around the house, and astounded them by locating the samples using my home-made Geiger counter. After a few years that Geiger counter would start clicking wherever you took it in the house, which may have some long lasting effects on the Manning gene pool – only time will tell.

We lived on a dairy farm east of Edmonton and I later persuaded my father to add a room on to the end of our hired man’s bunk house which I could use as a laboratory. I borrowed some hydrolysis equipment from our school and began to manufacture hydrogen for the purposes of filling balloons which my friends and I hoped to explode by shooting at them with 22’s. With me hinting darkly about my experiments with radiation and hydrogen, the hired man became convinced that I was only one step away from making “the bomb”, so I reduced my scientific activity because if the hired man had quit I would have had to milk the cows.

I went on to enrol in Honours Physics at the University of Alberta but found that I couldn’t handle the math and so after three years switched to economics (which I think says something unflattering about economics.). Having searched for truth via both the physical and the social sciences, I then went into politics where truth is completely irrelevant.

So having by now thoroughly impressed you with my scientific and truth-telling credentials, I would like to turn to our topic of helping scientists to communicate more effectively with politicians.

IMPORTANCE

First, just a word on the importance of “bridging the communications gap” between the political and scientific community.

I say it is desperately important – important to you so that you can more effectively request increased funding and more

enlightened policies governing science, technology, and innovation. But increasingly important from the politician’s standpoint as well, as more and more public policy issues – from climate change to the knowledge industry to genetic modification of food to bioterrorism – have a scientific dimension to them, requiring an understanding of what science has to say on such issues and what science may contribute to their solution.

THE SOURCE-MESSAGE-RECEIVER MODEL OF COMMUNICATIONS

If we are going to think about communications, it is helpful to have a “model” of how communications works. One of the oldest and simplest of such models – one us politicians can actually understand – is the old Source-Message-

Receiver model which I would like to use to make a few very basic but important points.

This model says that in every communication you have a Source (let’s say a scientist or science association or granting council) which generates a Message (say a request for funding or a change in policy) which is carried by a Medium (say an oral presentation or written brief) to a Receiver (say a politician, or parliamentary committee or ministry) to which the Receiver responds in some way (silence, more info please, maybe, yes, no, try again next year), establishing a Feedback Loop which can make the whole process dynamic and ongoing.

Every communication also takes place in a Context – a physical context, a time context, a psychological context, a scientific context, a political context – and sometimes the context in which the message is generated (say, the objective, analytic, rational, altruistic environment of the university – I jest) is quite different from the context in which the receiver receives and interprets it (say, the subjective, instinctive, chaotic, vote-seeking, fishbowl environment of the politician – I do not jest). All of which can cause complications.

The context may include Noise and other Sources (the media, other scientists, other interests) all generating messages (like, give us more money), all competing and conflicting with your Message and creating further complications in getting through to the Receiver and getting the response you want.

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In addition the Source has Grids – the culture, the thinking process, the vocabulary of the Source through which the message passes and which shape it in particular ways before it ever gets to the medium or the receiver. The Receiver also has Grids – its culture, thinking processes, vocabulary – which shape its interpretation of incoming messages and its feedback responses in unique ways as well. When the cultural, thinking processes and vocabulary Grids of the Source – say, a scientist – are fundamentally different from those of the Receiver – say, a politician – you have all the complications and challenges of cross-cultural communications which also need to be recognized and addressed if effective communication is going to occur.

This model sheds some interesting light on the differences in how politicians and scientists communicate.

I, for example, practise what is called “**receiver-oriented**” communication. This is a very appropriate, even necessary style for a democratic politician.

When I make a speech or a presentation, I have clearly in mind the objective I want to achieve – the response I want to generate in my audience.

But I don’t start my communications planning or presentation outline with what I want to say or how I would like to say it.

I start with the audience: Who are they? What are their attitudes? Vocabulary? What media do they like to receive their message through? [See Table 1; Receiver-Oriented Communication Questionnaire]

But some of us are **source oriented** communicators – if we’re the source of the message our instinct is to communicate it the way it occurred to us via the words, images, media with which we are most comfortable.

Many scientists are like this. They communicate in the mode of scientific method.

- Illustration: Imagine a scientist who is visiting a banker or venture-capitalist. The scientist wants to explain his work/project/requirement in the way that seems logical to him or her: Problem; Observations; Hypotheses; Experimental verification; Conclusion. But the banker is looking for the conclusion – the bottom line – **first**, and only if he understands the end-point will he listen to the description of how to get there.

When source-oriented communicators try to communicate directly to receiver-oriented communicators, there is lots of **room for misunderstanding** – like ships passing in the night.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR BRIDGING THE COMMUNICATIONS GAP BETWEEN SCIENTISTS AND POLITICIANS

I. Broaden the context – try to establish a relationship with the political community on grounds other than the milk

TABLE 1

RECEIVER-ORIENTED COMMUNICATION QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Who is the TARGET of your communication, your audience?
 - Primary Target?
 - Secondary Target?
2. What do you know about this TARGET that will assist the Leader in communicating effectively with it?
 - Values, interests, background knowledge, attitudes?
 - Current relationship between target and the Leader?
 - Common ground? major differences?
3. What is the general CONTEXT in which the communication will occur?
 - Date, season (near a holiday? other major Reform events?)
 - Emotional, psychological climate?
4. To what competing messages and “NOISE” is this Target subject?
 - Key messages? influences? to which the target is subject from other sources.
 - Other messages you know this target is receiving from other Reform Party sources.
5. Why is a communication from the Leader the most appropriate MEDIUM for communicating with this target? Were other media considered for this project?
6. What is the primary RESPONSE which you desire from this Target as a result of your communications? i.e., what is your communications objective?
 - What do you want this Target to say or do in response?
 - To what interest or desire of this Target must the message appeal in order to stimulate the desired response?
 - What incentives must accompany the message to induce the desired response?
 - IS THE RESPONSE TO BE SOLICITED FROM THIS TARGET THE “RIGHT” RESPONSE? I.E., IS YOUR COMMUNICATIONS OBJECTIVE THE “RIGHT” OBJECTIVE IN RELATION TO REFORM PRINCIPLES AND OBJECTIVES?
7. What is the NET IMPRESSION you want to leave with this Target?
 - How do you want the Target to think and feel as a result of the communication?
8. What is the key MESSAGE or MESSAGES to be communicated to this Target? Express each message in one sentence or less.
 - What key Message would produce the desired response?

TABLE 1 (continued)

- What Messages are required:
 - To identify or position the writer relative to this Target?
 - To correct any major misconceptions held by this Target?
 - To provide this Target with information necessary to respond as desired?
 - To persuade/induce this Target to respond as desired?
 - How would this Target express your Message if he understood it and was attempting to communicate it to someone else? i.e., is the message "source-oriented" or "target-oriented"?
 - IS THE MESSAGE "TRUE"?
9. What should be the overall TONE of the messages and the communications piece?
 - Positive/negative?
 - Aggressive/laid back?
 - Authoritative/sollicitous?
 - Empathetic?
 - etc.
 10. Can you identify any useful ANECDOTES, analogies, illustrations, "pictures," which may be used to effectively illustrate or "carry" the Messages? What analogies or illustrations might the Target use in attempting to communicate your Message to someone else?
 11. Who (what spokesperson) would be the best SOURCE for your communication?
 - Out of whose mouth would this message be most credible?
 12. How is FEEDBACK from this Target to be received and interpreted?
 - What previous feedback has been received to similar messages, and how was it received and interpreted?
 - To whom are the Target's responses to be directed?
 - Who is responsible for interpreting and evaluating the Target's response?
 - What practical arrangements have been made for dealing with the response? (e.g., arrangements for counting replies, handling contributions, referring offers of services, etc.)
 - Is an alternative feedback channel required to check on the effectiveness of this communication?
 13. Can you identify any STRATEGIC GUIDELINES which would be useful in drafting this communication?
 - Suggestions for repositioning the writer or the message, dealing with competing sources, approaching the particular audience?

cow - milking machine relationship. When the time does come to request increased funding, the communications will be more effective if funding is NOT the only basis of the relationship. How can you establish a relationship?

- A. A simple social relationship - take a politician to lunch or dinner and inquire about his or her interests, understandings, priorities - so that when you need something, that politician is at least an acquaintance if not a friend, and not a complete stranger.
- B. Mini "Bacon and Eggheads" breakfasts - at your university, in your city (cf. the Ottawa breakfasts arranged by the Partnership Group for Science and Engineering).
- C. Meet individual politicians on their own ground - a visit to their constituency office, or even to a political meeting where you greet them afterwards and let them know you are there. Politicians will be more interested in you and your interests, if you show some interest in them and their interests. This is simply human nature.
- D. Invite the political decision maker to your lab, department, or project. Politicians get screeds of invitations from universities - usually from the law faculty, the political science clubs and departments, the journalist faculty, sometimes the medical faculty - but only rarely from the physicists, the chemists, or the biologists.
- E. When the politician comes to your department, lab, or project - don't focus on the facilities and equipment. Introduce him/her to your **people**. Are not the scientists themselves the heart of the scientific endeavour? We say so, but we don't showcase them nearly enough or well enough. People, especially politicians, relate to people far better than they do to things. (Have a layman's version of your résumé ready that stresses where you come from, your family, your non-scientific interests, possible common ground with a non-scientist; and have a description of your work, but in the form you would use if you were explaining it to your mother. For your colleagues, you can still have your professional résumé and all your publications and the scientific version of your work - but you need the layman's version to give to politicians.)
- F. Search for and find common ideological ground. This is not as formidable as it may sound. Liberal/socialist politicians have a predisposition to government spending (government support of everything). Conservative politicians have a predisposition to facilitate private investment (link between freedom of enterprise and freedom of scientific inquiry).
- G. **Note:** The above may seem like a lot of work, and a nuisance, and a diversion from your primary scientific interests - but remember other people, other interests, with whom and with which you are competing for attention and funds, are doing this all the time. Can the scientific community - or at least certain designated members of it - afford not to?

II. Put your messages to politicians in their politically communicable form.

It is important to understand how communications and the media completely dominate the modern political mind. If you or I go to meet with a caucus of politicians to present some carefully researched policy positions on support for science or a science policy, the average caucus member is sitting there thinking:

- If we adopt that position, how will I explain **that** at the townhall meeting back home next Saturday night?
- If we adopt that position, how will I explain **that** to the CTV reporter who is waiting outside this room when he sticks his mike and his camera in my face.

What that politician is doing is judging the policy position or the action we are trying to get him or her to take – not first and foremost on its policy merits, not on its economic or administrative feasibility, not on its constitutionality or even its morality, but on its **communicability through the media to the public**.

If we can't satisfy these concerns about communicability **at the front end** – within about ninety seconds – by showing right then and there how our position can be communicated, by putting it in its politically communicable form – our position is in trouble with that caucus member regardless of its other merits.

Once you do demonstrate that what you are advocating is politically communicable, **then** you can get that caucus to concentrate on its other merits and features, including the research and substantive arguments on which it is based.

And so if we want a caucus, a legislative committee, a cabinet minister, a government to adopt some position relative to supporting science or the incorporation of science into some other decision, it isn't enough to present the research that supports this position or to spell out the policy in administrative or legislative terms. The message must be framed first and foremost in its **politically communicable form** – and the rest will follow.

III. Find Hooks

How do you put a science-related message or position in a politically communicable form?

What this usually requires is “finding hooks” in the psyche and experience of the politicians, the media, and the public to which the scientific message can be related and attached, and “presenting the hook” at the front end of the presentation in order to attract their attention to what you really want to say.

Some of us need to practise this, especially if our most usual form of communication is through the writing of technical papers or grant applications. Here are several examples of groups who were attempting to get a scientific message across to politicians and how the politically

communicable strategy was, or could have been, applied in these instances.

A. Story of asking my U of T POL490 Class to give me an “oral briefing” in Genetic Science:

I have been teaching a course on Public Policy and the Genetic Revolution at the University of Toronto. I asked my students to imagine that they are Legislative Assistants to busy MPs and that they have been asked to attend some presentations by plant, animal, and medical geneticists on the public policy implications of their science. They must report back to me, as an MP – i.e., give me an **oral briefing**.

The first time we did this most of my students brought me a paper to read, much the way many scientists do. But I (MP) am not like a professor. I do **not** have to read your paper. I'm not sure I'm even interested in your presentation on a scientific subject. You must first get my attention, and get it in the first thirty seconds.

Initially science students had more difficulty in doing this than political science and law students -- “Source oriented communicators” -- did; but they caught on quickly. They started using good hooks, such as “What did you eat for breakfast this morning? (Do you realize GMO content?)”

On a little heavier note:

B. Story of MPs' Visit to Chalk River to discuss Neutron Reactor:

Some scientists wanted to get political support for building an advanced neutron reactor at Chalk River. I persuaded a small group of MPs to accompany me to Chalk River for a presentation by a very reputable nuclear physicist.

The presentation was made from the science perspective; i.e., Physics 101 (what is a neutron? what is a reactor? what is a neutron beam? etc.); then the Applications (and by the way, here is a piece of the O-ring from the Saturn vehicle); followed by the “case” for the neutron generator.

Had I been the one making the presentation, I would have made it from a political perspective: Begin with “stress” (examples, Saturn vehicle blowing up, bridge collapsing, Firestone tire exploding, etc.); explain the “lesson” (stress costs, stress kills, etc.); define “stress” (molecules that should hang together, de-coupling); and, finally, iterate how can we study stress and the importance of doing so (this is when we give Physics 101; the neutron generator can be used to study stress, i.e. the “case” for the neutron generator).

The physicist making that presentation needed help in putting his science message into a politically communicable form. But where is that help going to come from? And from whom would such a learned man take advice on communications? (I will return to this in a moment).

C. Story of a great approach to getting MP's attention for the neutrino project underground at Sudbury.

Take the politician 2 km. underground. Wander through the tunnels. Turn out the lights. Then suggest that if he would like some help getting back to the surface, perhaps he could say what his position is on supporting neutrino research.

D. National Institute for Nanotechnology

I am Chair of the Federal Provincial Advisory Board to Canada's National Institute for Nanotechnology (NINT) project at the University of Alberta. Suppose I have five minutes with a member of the provincial legislature and I want to get him/her interested in and supportive of nano-science and nano-technology.

What's a good hook? An instantaneous hook?

A blown up photo of a piece of oil sand taken through an electron microscope at the nano scale showing that nano science will help us understand, at the most fundamental level, how clay, water, and hydrocarbon bind together, and how that bond might be broken with less energy, which might lead to....

Or suppose I run into the Federal Health Minister and I want to get him enthused about nano-science/technology.

What's a good hook? An instantaneous hook?

A blown-up photo of the bird flu virus H5N1 taken through an electron microscope at the nano scale showing that nano science will help us understand, at the most fundamental level, how that virus affixes itself to and penetrates a cell, which might lead to....

The hook is not a substitute for all the more substantive things that you want to say to politicians.

The hook is just used to get your audience's attention, and to make the connection between what you want to say and something they are interested in. Did you note that, in my non-science example, I didn't have to sacrifice basic science to applied science in these communications. I'm not claiming that nano-science holds the solution to oil sands separation or getting a vaccine for bird flu -- what I am claiming is that nano-science will increase our understanding of these things and that that in itself is vitally important and the first step toward some practical application.

IV. Ride the Waves

There are certain times, related to specific events, when governments, industry, the media, and the public are more willing to listen to science-based messages than at other times. For example:

- In the years immediately after the Russians launched the first orbital satellite Sputnik, there was a great

wave of public interest and a great wave of support for increasing the investment in scientific and technological education in North America and Europe.

- In the weeks after the SARS health scare, there was a surge of interest on the part of decision makers and the public in epidemiology, and those with something to say on that subject and how to prevent future SARS-like outbreaks had a wave they could ride a long way.
- In January 2005 you had a whole world open to understanding the geophysics of tsunamis; and a few weeks ago you had the eyes and ears of North America open to understanding the science of hurricanes.

Although unfortunate, these events present opportunities for scientists working in areas that could help prevent, understand, or respond to, these events to put their research into a context that the public and politicians would be interesting in hearing. They are "waves" to watch for, that may be helpful in communicating science themes and messages, especially to politicians:

- On the positive side, the high and increasing public interest in health and the environment. These are major issues in which there is already a high degree of public interest - new things happening all the time - and where the public doesn't need much convincing that science - in particular the life sciences and environmental sciences - have important contributions to make. It is well worth the time of scientists and science administrators in these areas to design and build "communications surfboards" to ride those waves..
- On the negative side, there is a rising interest and concern over potential pandemics. More and more health-care experts are telling us we should be preparing for a pandemic involving an outbreak of some SARS-like phenomenon, or avian flu, or some other mutated virus on a large scale. This is a subject which is attracting more and more interest and media coverage, and to which science and technology has some of the answers, particularly with respect to prevention and containment. Be prepared to "ride the wave."

LONGER TERM INITIATIVES TO BRIDGE THE GAP

1. Harness the science of communications to the communication of science.

Intermediaries are needed who can mediate between politicians and scientists. Scientists shouldn't look down on these people as mere media or PR flakes. They can help.

The communication staffs of science organizations and political offices can help. More could be done to "pre-test" science messages being delivered to political receivers, and to teach effective follow-up. Some scientists are good communicators (eg., Art McDonald and the Neutrino project), and they could be held up as role models and encouraged to share their expertise with others.

And there is a **longer-term solution** that would help us all. There are people in Canada who specialize in the science of communication: Psychologists who study how an idea gets from one person's head to another's; Electronics engineers who understand electronic communications; and Anthropologists and sociologists who understand cross-cultural communications, etc.

There is a **science** of how a signal, a word, an idea can be transmitted effectively from one person's head to another.

I would therefore like to propose, in addition to the other suggestions I have already made, that **someone launch a project to examine the Application of the Science of Communication to the Communication of Science.**

Such a project might well capture the imagination of the science and educational communities, and prove extremely useful in improving communications between science and the broader community, including the politicians.

2. Recruit, train, and support a few members of the scientific community to run for public office.

Currently there are no genuine scientists in any of the caucuses in Ottawa, and very few at the upper levels of political staffs. I am not suggesting, or expecting, that a scientist in the peak of his/her creative years run for office; but how about older deans or administrators, or younger people with good science training, that have political/communications interests? The Manning Centre for Building Democracy (visit www.manningcentre.ca) can play a role in training/mentoring scientists interested in personal political involvement. (Give me a dozen potential candidates and I will work on them)

3. Use issue campaigns to move science, technology, and innovation higher on the political agenda.

Suppose you conclude that, notwithstanding all your efforts, science and science funding are simply not high enough on the public and political agenda to command the attention and resources they deserve.

Suppose that even when you put your science/science funding message in its most politically communicable form, it still has trouble competing for public and political attention against other priorities like health care, energy prices, or some other high profile issue?

What can you do?

Well, one thing you can do is to consider organizing and participating in what I call an **issue campaign.**

What is an **issue campaign?**

- It is like an election campaign.
- It has a beginning and an end (is of finite duration).
- It uses a Campaign Team - includes a campaign manager, fundraisers, communication people, volunteers, and the grassroots component.
- It includes a Campaign Strategy that identifies objectives and has targets, key messages (e.g., your future job and prospects depend on S&T), and a call to action (deliver this message to these people this week).

The object of your Issue Campaign is not to get someone elected. Its object is to get your issue (science and science funding), or policy change that you would like, higher on the public and/or political priority list than it was when you started. Your ultimate goal is that, when the federal or provincial politician sends out his or her pollster, they start to discover that 2 out of 5, 3 out of 5 voters are saying.... (your message/your solution).

The great thing about issue campaigns - when they work, and even when they don't work as successfully as one would like - is that they move people interested in your issue and position beyond merely discussing it, to doing something about it. We Canadians have a terrible pre-disposition to substitute discussion for action, and issue campaigns challenge us to move beyond that comfortable but frequently ineffective position.

CONCLUSION

The preceding are just a few of the practical steps that can be taken to bridge the communications gap between the scientific and political communities. I encourage you to experiment with them over the next year. Find what works for you, and apply it to your communication needs.