

Silence and Leadership

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Communications skills are often identified, with good reason, as fundamental assets in leadership. No one will deny that communication is truly indispensable in the practice of leadership.

But communication is not a simple phenomenon. What may appear to be simple at first is not always so clear in reality. Allow me to outline my opinion on two mysterious aspects of effective leadership: the body and silence.

The Intelligence of the Body

Karen Kain, the great Canadian ballerina who is now artistic director of the National Ballet of Canada and president of the Canada Council for the Arts, chose to call her autobiography *Movement Never Lies*. Indeed, in the arts world dance stands out as a discipline in which movement predominates and the body is the main instrument.

Since the 19th century and the magnificent creations of Marius Petipa at the Marinski Theatre (the Kirov Ballet) of St. Petersburg, physical expression has been elevated to a level of great refinement in ballet. Not only do professional ballet dancers need talent, but they must also do a great deal of work on themselves to succeed. Many are called, few are chosen. Ballet is a constructed aesthetic (i.e., people do not naturally walk on the tips of their toes), but certainly

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not the first phenomenon of this kind to be witnessed in art. The sound made with a string, a bow, or even with the human voice, can be taken to sublime heights, and all can surpass the natural. In ballet as in opera, we are conscious of the fact that an aesthetic is at play. The same applies in the visual arts.

During the 20th century, a movement in dance detached itself from this tradition. Martine Époque, who has also been called “the mother of contemporary dance” in Montréal, believes that her art is not about creating a false aesthetic, but rather finding a natural intelligence of the body on the stage and using it in performance. It is thanks to her that Montréal has become a centre for dance in North America, if not the world. The greats of our dance industry, Louise Bédard, Paul-André Fortier, Louise Lecavalier, Daniel Léveillé, Édouard Lock, and Ginette Laurin (to name just a few) owe their careers to her.

Martine Époque got her training in classical dance and her physical education in Europe. She went on to found the Nouvelle Aire group in Montreal. Her method was to provide rigorous training, refine the body, develop a “nuancé corporel,” and then showcase the resulting articulacy and subtlety of expression, allowing the dancers to create.

Leadership within the body

In leadership, this kind of intelligence and bodily expression also play major roles. I am not referring here to what has been called “Body Language,” or even “Walking the Talk.” Leaders learn (most often quite naturally) the secrets of real, true expression so that they can effectively communicate on television, for example. But while politicians, performers, athletes, and TV hosts have learned to use their bodies to effectively address the camera, courses in communication are not enough. I am talking about an authentic way of being and expressing that translates the “truth” of a person. The public knows or senses if communication is real, if it is hitting its mark. And it is the body that is doing the talking. You don’t need to take courses or be a specialist to grasp that concept. Audience members will understand without necessarily being able to explain what they are feeling.

Studies have shown that the words we use only account for 7% of the confidence and credibility conveyed in a message, whereas our visual output counts for 55%. The first electoral debates to be televised at the beginning of the 1960s were an eloquent example of this phenomenon in communications. People who listened to the Kennedy–Nixon debate on the radio were largely of the opinion that Nixon had won. But those who watched the debate on television held exactly the opposite opinion. The importance of the body was patently obvious in this case.

Martine Époque believes that there is a “soul of the body” that differs from the kind of soul we are more familiar with. In her ongoing research into the essence of corporal movement, she teaches us a great deal about leadership. The man or woman in the street not only know intuitively if a message is successfully communicated, but also if it is authentic, and if it suits who the speaker appears to be.

Indeed, in leadership, even if a leader is lying (in politics or in business), or uses his or her body in a way that simply is not authentic, *movement never lies!*

Silence

When actors study their craft,² they learn to act out their lines, but they also learn to act out silences. They act “between the lines.” For actors or ballet dancers, credibility is established through the visual, through the body, and through thought. None of these elements escapes the character they are playing, whether they are reciting their script, moving, or remaining immobile, tense, or in a state of relaxation. All of this “play,” full of assumed silences, contributes to the “natural” and to a type of aesthetic.

Speaking of “natural” for example, it is a given that at the end of a rehearsal, actors know both their roles and the roles of the other actors by heart. They learn to be true on stage, “acting” as though a situation were new every time, and as though they were hearing the other characters’ scripted lines for the first time, with every show. Audience members feel that there is a “fullness” in the silence, which is often very intense, and which can last several seconds.

Even those who are novices to the theatre world have no problem spotting amateur actors. They are the ones who react too quickly to other characters’ lines because they are too caught up in their own character or script. They have learned their script by rote, without taking the time to really assimilate its meaning, thereby cutting themselves off from what the other characters (or actors) are experiencing and saying.

In the craft of acting, silence is also experienced at another level. Actors “breathe” their script. They understand it, and feel its depth and truth. Because they “breathe” the script, they are never out of breath, and don’t leave the public feeling winded either. The audience feels that actors have taken them into their confidence.

Breathing never takes place in complete silence. There is also phrasing to do in scripts. Actors work on their scripts to see, feel, and act out the deeper meaning of the text, and even the sub-text phrasing, so that audience members do not question whether or not the actor is only “acting out” the text.

In their craft, actors can bring out a writer’s meaning using a script that, in a literal sense, may not seem to say a great deal. It is this research work and this kind of acting that allows actors to convey not only the words that the author wrote, but also the deeper, hidden intentions, and feelings that often remain implicit.

A strong familiarity with silence allows actors to hear silences that remain imperceptible for most people. They are even able “hear” the particular silence of a room. They are like acoustics specialists, who can hear the silence of any theatre or music hall they walk into, and know right away what effect speaking or singing will have, and how the sound of musical instruments will carry.

Actors can hear an audience’s silence. When I became a theatre director in my late 20s, I often went backstage with the actors during the shows. As they exited the stage after a scene or two, I would hear them saying, “The theatre is playing well this evening.” It took me some time to understand what they meant by that. I also heard them say, “There is a pocket of

² I studied at Conservatoire d’art dramatique de Québec in 1962 and 1963.

resistance on the left,” or “They’re sleeping down below, on the right,” or “We’ll get to them yet!”

A theatre may be pitch dark. The actors may not be able to see a thing. But the audience is still breathing and likely shifting slightly in their seats. These are the subtle movements that actors hear, something that others may perceive as silence.

When you are a leader trying to communicate, the same fundamental considerations apply.

The body speaks as loudly as the words we say. The people we address hear our silences. We feel full or empty. We have all heard the bombastic speeches that politicians deliver, full of studied silences injected for effect, but empty of meaning.

Audience members are able to follow the subtext behind the words that are spoken, and know that words may not fit the meaning of the message. Almost instinctively, they can sense whether the words and the phrasing used are the product of sincere thought. It is most especially this kind of thought (authentic in its falsehood or its truthfulness) that people receive.

Leaders who truly communicate also hear the silences of the people they are addressing. Often a good communicator (whether or not he or she is a leader) who can truly connect with an audience will be able to hear enthusiastic endorsement, cold, hard-core resistance, or hidden misgivings.³

Leaders can see as well. The people they address react with their bodies. Leaders can see their gazes,⁴ their eyes. They can observe the movements of people’s bodies, even though they are likely trying to hide their reactions.

Above all, through their sensitivity, leaders can put themselves in the audience’s shoes and hear its silences. In a way, leaders can gain deeper knowledge from inside, and know very well that what is expressed on the outside is not the whole message. That is why they can tell you what they think by using silence, without having to utter a word.

Leadership comes from the inside and from the world of silence. Management comes from the outside, from the world of extraversion, and written and spoken words. If you do not embrace the importance of silence in all of its forms, art or leadership is not for you.

³A “contre-discours” or *anti-discourse* is what Jean-Blaize Grize calls the inner reflections of audience members when an orator is addressing them.

⁴ In *Britannicus* by Jean Racine, Nero tells June (who is going to meet her lover while Nero is hidden away to observe the scene), “I will hear the gazes that you may believe are without a voice.”