

The Only Trait of a Leader

*A field guide to success
for new engineers, scientists,
and technologists*

**by
John E. West**

The Only Trait of a Leader

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It is not the purpose of this text to reprint all available information on leadership skills and techniques for technology professionals, but instead to complement, amplify, and supplement other texts. You are urged to read all of the available material to learn as much as possible and tailor the information presented here and elsewhere to your individual needs.

This is a sample from the new book “The Only Trait of a Leader,” by John E. West.

If you're interested in learning more, check out full details on the web site, www.onlytraitofaleader.com. There you can download samples of other chapters, or buy the entire book in PDF or print form.

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 4

Oral Communication

I started the last chapter by stressing the importance of being able to communicate effectively in writing. Mastery of most of the skills and the strategies I've talked about in this book become more important as your responsibility and authority increase throughout the course of your career. As I mentioned in the last chapter, writing is different in that an inability to communicate effectively in writing can be crippling to your career almost from the start.

Oral communication is a little different. The fear of public speaking is almost universal, and even people who are comfortable with it report being nervous right before they get up to speak. Being an uncomfortable or ineffective public speaker early in your career as a scientist or technologist is often not debilitating, and finding junior staff members who are comfortable and effective speakers is an exceptional occurrence.

So ineffective speaking isn't a crushing defect at the start of your career. But it can be the key to your ability to ascend beyond the rank and file and into the senior levels of your organization. This payoff is down the road (and you might not even see yourself taking this track ever), so you might be tempted to put off devel-

opment of this skill until later in your career, when you “need it.” This is a huge mistake. Here’s why: by the time you *need* these skills it is already assumed that you have them, and making mistakes in this situation is not well tolerated.

Making mistakes is part of learning anything new, and you are guaranteed to make them, and guaranteed to have bad (probably really, really bad) talks at least once in a while early in your development of these skills. The only way to avoid making a big mistake when the stakes are high is to start getting experience—making your mistakes—early in your career when the stakes are low (or, as we’ll see later, when there are no stakes at all).

The second reason to start developing speaking skills now is that practice really does make perfect, even more so than with writing. The biggest obstacle to effective oral communication for many people is simply not knowing how to deal with the various situations you’ll confront and how to handle the emotions that you’ll have to manage in those situations. The only way to get past this obstacle is to experience the situations and see what solutions work for you, then practice and refine those solutions over many additional experiences. Since for most of us the opportunity to speak to an audience doesn’t come on a daily basis, the only way to get enough practice to become competent is to start early in your career.

The third reason not to put off honing your oral communication skills is that a demonstrated ability to speak well is a tremendous asset to your career, and it can greatly accelerate your advancement. I have experienced this in my own career, and credit my ability to speak well to many different audiences with a large part of my rapid rise in my organization. You may feel that this isn’t important to you; your goal is to remain “in the trenches” for the rest of your career, to stay technical and avoid the management rat race. This is a completely valid career choice. It is not wise, however, to limit your future choices based on a decision you make at the outset of your career. You will change, your company or organization will change, and your ideas of what is and isn’t

fulfilling will change as the years go on. Eight years ago I would have denied any interest in becoming the director of the center I work in, but here I am, happy to be doing the job. Twenty years from now may well be too late to decide that you're ready to go ahead into a leadership track in your company if you haven't already developed and refined your speaking skills. At that point your "choice" to stay technical is no longer a choice; your decision not to develop certain skills now will make certain decisions for you in the years to come.

To be an enlightened leader, start investing the time now to gain the experience and skills you will need to communicate effectively with the spoken word.

What's here

This chapter covers the two primary types of oral communication (public and private), and provides pointers on how you can shape the way you think about the spoken word and approach speaking—a way that will help you stand out as a powerful and effective communicator. The purposes of speaking—to inform, educate, and persuade—are essentially the same as the purposes of writing, and I will not revisit the techniques we discussed in the previous chapter (though I do recommend that you revisit them for review). I will also not spend much time at all talking about the more general techniques of effective speaking or the mechanics of creating presentations. There are literally hundreds of books, classes, and workshops that cover these topics and I urge you to take advantage of them to fully develop your ability to speak powerfully. As you develop, look for opportunities to strengthen both the public and private aspects of your speaking skills. There are many nuances and complexities to interacting effectively in small groups or one on one, and you'll need to develop these skills as well.

Before we visit the particulars of private and public speaking, however, let's talk about some tips that apply equally well in both settings.

Getting through: attention and understanding

When planning any oral interaction—private or public—you must keep in mind that your goal is to communicate with your audience. We talked about this with writing, and the same thing applies to spoken communications.

In fact, the focus on audiences' understanding is even more critical with the spoken word than the written. When you are unclear in writing, your audience has a record (the document) that they can study or reference later. But when you are speaking, there isn't a record of what you have said (unless you are being taped, which is fairly unusual). It is also the case that oral presentations are usually time-limited, so you may have to move fairly quickly from one topic to the next. Thus your only opportunity to communicate your message to your audience is that little window of time you have with them when you are actually addressing that portion of the message. Unlike with the written word, when you are speaking you have to be clear the first time, every time.

In the limit, of course, this is impossible. You cannot hope to communicate your message, and only your message, to every member of every audience every time. Your audience is comprised of individuals with individual histories, vocabularies, and lives. Some of them won't be paying attention during a key point—perhaps their phone rings. Some of them won't come away with the sense of urgency that you hoped to communicate, because they reacted differently to the phrase “significant concern” than you wanted. Some won't be interested in your topic and so won't devote their full attention to your content, despite your best efforts. There is not much you can do about these problems other than to be aware of them and design around them as much as possible.

It is also important to remember that from moment to moment you are a different person and that your effectiveness as a speaker will naturally vary with each talk as well. Some days you'll be “up” while other days you'll be fighting not to let the audience know that there are a million things you'd rather be doing. This too will affect your ability to communicate your message to your audience.

You can take some steps to minimize these risks to your message. You can avoid dependence on vocabulary and shades of meaning—at least those that imply one thing to you but might imply something quite different to others—by describing a problem *and* its consequences to your audience. (Of course, you must use some vocabulary and you hope you succeed in achieving some nuanced shades of meaning!) Rather than just identifying a software design problem as a “significant concern” you can go on to say that the likely impact of this problem is a delay in getting product to market before Christmas. In this way you empower the audience to individually substitute their own phrase—“crisis”, “emergency”, “disaster” and so on—for yours, and in so doing they can better internalize your message.

You can help avoid inattentiveness by making your presentations short and to the point, and by not reading the implications of slides to your audience in great detail. I find a highly graphic slide with almost no text goes a long way toward capturing the audience’s attention (this is partly because in technology this slide approach is very rare). We’ll talk more about this later.

You can help manage the differences in your personality and style by being familiar with the material and comfortable in the venue.

The magic is in the middle

Your talks will probably start out by saying what you hope to accomplish and probably end by summarizing what you said. The magic—the place where you and your audience will connect and *your message* will become *their goal*—is in the middle. Your best insurance that your audience will be with you in the middle, and not mentally rearranging their “To Do” lists, is to be responsive to them and adapt *what* you are saying, and *how* you are saying it, to their reactions. In order to make the magic happen in the middle, you have to adapt and respond to your audience from the beginning.

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