

LEADING WITH FAITH



TIMELESS LESSONS
FROM SPIRITUAL GIANTS

DANIEL L. JOHNSTON

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THE COMMUNICATORS

WORDS MATTER. THAT MESSAGE WAS DELIVERED TO ME EARLY AND OFTEN throughout my career. The way you communicate as a leader has a profound impact on the performance of your organization and the well-being of those you lead. I've witnessed this truth in every position I've served, regardless of the situation, whether giving commands to individuals, briefing generals, or addressing my squadron during a Commander's Call. Over time, I've come to understand the immense power of words and the damage they can cause if not chosen carefully.

When people think of good communicators, buzzwords from a variety of leadership books or models often come to mind: active listening, feedback sandwich, or strategic framing. There is nothing wrong with these methods nor the dozens of other techniques employed by managers across the country. They can be useful and help supervisors connect with those they are responsible for. However, being a good communicator on a tactical level with these techniques is not the same as communicating well as a leader.

That's what sets certain leaders apart. These are the ones who have mastered communication to the point where it's not something they carefully manage but rather a tool they wield to shape better outcomes for their people. Like any master of a craft, they are able to develop their own distinct communication style based on their personality, position, and goals. In other words, because they've perfected their piano scales, they can now choose whether to play jazz, blues, or classical.

These leaders excel in communication, each in their own way, offering valuable lessons we can study and learn from. Some are more utilitarian, showing skill in effectively communicating a vision to their entire organization or articulating the organization's values to external stakeholders. Others are more personal, like those who speak truth with power or possess the empathy

to connect deeply with their people. And others can simplify complex issues for their teams, ensuring clarity and focus.

When all is said and done, great communication as a leader is not about following a script or formula. It's about knowing your audience, adapting your message, and inspiring those you lead. Whether the goal is to motivate, inform, or unite, words are the bridge between vision and action. The leaders who understand the power they wield in communicating, whether through their words or their actions, are the ones who will truly make a lasting impact on their organization.

ALMA THE YOUNGER: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN COMPLEXITY AND CLARITY

Albert Einstein is often credited with the saying “If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.” While it's uncertain whether he actually said this, this sentiment has always resonated with me. One of the most common issues within organizations is miscommunication, especially between leaders and those they lead. To be able to explain concepts, even complicated ones, in a way that is understood and able to be acted upon is a gift that many leaders do not possess.

As a missionary in London, I taught people from dozens of different countries, each bringing their own language and culture. Most of them spoke some English to some degree, but the real challenge was not just speaking the language but ensuring that our listeners truly understood the principles we were teaching. Our task as missionaries was to explain profound celestial truths in a way that everyone could comprehend and internalize. That's why, when it came to guiding people through the gospel of Jesus Christ, we often turned to Alma's discourses. His teachings on the plan of salvation, the nature of God, and the concept of faith offered clarity that made these deep spiritual principles accessible to all.

Alma the Younger was born into a significant and spiritually influential family in Nephite society. His father, Alma the Elder, was a former priest of King Noah who, after a dramatic conversion experience influenced by the teachings of the prophet Abinadi, became a powerful religious leader. Alma the

Elder established the Church among the Nephites and played a critical role in preserving and spreading the teachings of the gospel.

Despite the spiritual environment in which he was raised, Alma the Younger rejected the religious teachings of his family and culture. He, along with the sons of King Mosiah, became notorious for their efforts to undermine the Church, leading others away from the faith and creating significant challenges for the religious community. Alma's rebellion was not just a personal issue; it had broader implications, threatening the unity and spiritual welfare of the people.

Though the exact methods Alma used to lead others away from the Church are not detailed, it's clear that even in his youth, he was a gifted communicator. His efforts to tear down the faith of others show how he was able to clearly and persuasively convey his ideas in a way that resonated with people. His ability to influence others likely stemmed from a natural charisma and a deep understanding of how to connect with his audience. Without his miraculous conversion, who knows how much damage he might have caused to the Nephite society?

This period of rebellion and his subsequent conversion are crucial to understanding Alma's development as a leader. His dramatic transformation from a man persecuting the Church to one of its most ardent defenders gave him a unique perspective and deep empathy for those who struggled with faith. Alma's leadership was profoundly shaped by his own experiences of sin, repentance, and redemption, enabling him to connect with a wide range of people and effectively communicate the importance of the gospel.

The turning point in Alma's life came when an angel of the Lord appeared to him and the sons of Mosiah as they sought to destroy the Church. Struck down and unable to move for three days, Alma endured intense spiritual anguish, confronting the gravity of his sins and the full weight of his guilt. As he prayed for mercy and recalled his father's teachings about Christ, he was miraculously delivered, experiencing the profound joy of forgiveness. This conversion deeply shaped Alma's life and leadership, instilling in him humility, reliance on God, and a recognition that his authority stemmed from the Savior. It also gave him a profound understanding of the gospel's transformative power, fueling his passion for preaching, guiding others, and

dedicating his life to serving selflessly as both a religious leader and chief judge of the Nephites.

Alma's greatest strength as a leader was his ability to communicate complex concepts in a clear, persuasive, and relatable way, using emotionally engaging sermons that resonated with the everyday experiences of his listeners. A key example of Alma's effective communication style is his use of personal experience to illustrate his teachings. He frequently referred to his own conversion story to demonstrate the power of repentance and the mercy of God. For instance, in his instruction to his son Helaman, he recounts his spiritual rebirth to highlight the transformative power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When he tells Helaman about his experience, he says, "There could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains. Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy" (Alma 36:21) When Alma shares his journey through spiritual torment, listeners can feel his pain, a testament to his skill as a great communicator. Alma could place his audience directly within his story, allowing them to feel what he felt in the moment.

Alma also excelled at using questions to teach. The art of asking the right question is undervalued in leadership, and Alma showed how a well-formed, well-placed question could convey important principles. In a sermon to the people of Zarahemla, he used simple yet powerful questions to stir the souls of his listeners: "Have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?" (Alma 5:14). These questions weren't just instructional—they were designed to inspire self-reflection and personal commitment to the gospel.

Modern leaders can learn from Alma's approach by recognizing the power of asking thoughtful and purposeful questions to help their teams navigate complex issues. Rather than simply providing answers, Alma demonstrated that asking the right questions fosters deeper understanding and personal accountability. Leaders today can apply this principle by using questions to encourage critical thinking, promote self-reflection, and guide their teams toward discovering solutions independently. This approach not only builds problem-solving skills but also creates a sense of ownership and engagement among team members.

One of the most famous and influential teachings of Alma the Younger is his sermon on faith, found in Alma 32. This sermon, delivered to a group of impoverished Zoramites, encapsulates Alma's ability to communicate complex spiritual principles in a way that is both accessible and deeply impactful. In this discourse, Alma compares faith to "a seed [that] may be planted in your heart" and explains, "Behold, if it be a true seed, or a good seed, if ye do not cast it out by your unbelief, that ye will resist the Spirit of the Lord, behold, it will begin to swell within your breasts" (Alma 32:28)

Alma's analogy of the seed is a powerful example of his ability to make abstract concepts tangible, providing a concrete image to help his listeners understand faith. By comparing faith to a seed that requires good soil, water, and sunlight to grow, Alma illustrated that spiritual growth is an ongoing process requiring humility, diligence, and patience. This metaphor not only made faith relatable but also offered a rare, functional definition of how it can be cultivated and applied in daily life. While faith is a foundational principle referenced throughout scripture, Alma's discourse stands out for its practicality, bridging the gap between abstract theological discussions and everyday understanding.

The sermon on faith is also a masterclass in rhetorical technique. Alma begins by addressing the specific concerns of his audience: their poverty and exclusion from the mainstream religious practices of their society. As a great communicator, he understands that people care more about those messages that apply to them, so Alma wisely applies his teachings to their lives. He empathizes with their plight and reassures them that their humble circumstances do not exclude them from God's love or from the blessings of the gospel. This empathy establishes a connection with his listeners and makes them more receptive to his message.

Alma then gradually builds his argument, moving from basic principles of faith to more complex ideas about spiritual growth and the importance of nourishing one's testimony. He uses repetition and parallel structure to reinforce key points, making the sermon both memorable and persuasive. For example, he repeatedly emphasizes the need to "exercise a particle of faith" and to "nourish" the seed once it has been planted (Alma 32:27, 41). This

repetition not only underscores the importance of these actions but also creates a rhythm and flow that holds the listener's attention.

Alma concludes his sermon with a powerful call to action, urging his listeners to “begin to believe in the Son of God” and to “nourish [the word] by your faith,” looking forward to the blessings that will come from their efforts (Alma 33:22–23). This is not just a theoretical appeal—it is a practical invitation to experiment upon the word and experience the joy of spiritual growth for themselves.

Leaders today can draw valuable lessons from Alma's example, particularly his use of analogies to simplify and clarify complex ideas. In his sermon on faith, Alma's comparison of faith to a seed not only made an abstract concept tangible but also provided a step-by-step framework for spiritual growth that was relatable and actionable for his audience. Similarly, leaders today can use analogies to bridge the gap between intricate challenges and their teams' understanding, enabling more effective communication and decision-making. Leaders can use storytelling and analogical reasoning to connect to those they lead, tailoring their message to their audience's specific struggles. This approach allows leaders to meet people where they are, helping them grasp how the message applies to their own experiences and empowering them to act on it.

Alma's ability to communicate his thoughts clearly and persuasively was key to his success as a leader, inspiring widespread repentance and societal change among the Nephites. His sermons often led to profound transformations, such as the conversion of many Zoramites after his sermon on faith, which strengthened the Church and helped to heal social and religious divisions. Additionally, Alma's communication skills were vital in maintaining unity and resolving conflicts as chief judge, helping to build trust between the government and the people and fostering shared values and collective responsibility.

One of the central responsibilities of leaders across all industries is to be able to explain higher-level concepts in a way that all their people can understand and act upon. Alma's example offers timeless lessons in communication to assist leaders today in fulfilling that central responsibility. Alma knew how to connect with his people by relating abstract spiritual truths to their everyday experiences, making his teachings both meaningful and

actionable. Leaders should strive to simplify complex ideas without oversimplifying their depth. Alma was able to do this effectively by connecting his message to their everyday life through easily accessible parables and through his skill of presenting his audience with probing moral questions. His rhetorical tools prompted those he led to reflect and engage with the subject matter rather than simply having information dispensed to them. You can take the challenge to follow his example by tailoring your messages to the needs of your people. If done the right way, this effort will serve to foster a dialogue that has the potential to deepen understanding and inspire change.

KING BENJAMIN: ENSURING A MESSAGE IS NOT JUST HEARD BUT ALSO RECEIVED

It's often easy for leaders to send out an email and think their job is done because they have now practiced effective "communication." Unfortunately, for a message to be truly received by those in the organization, it takes more than that. For leaders to deliver a message that is truly received by their people, they need to provide context and reinforcement to drive home the importance of the message. If you have a message you need your people to know, tell them with your words and your actions how important it is.

In the Air Force, when a commander has an urgent message that needs to be disseminated throughout the entire organization, they schedule what is known as a Commander's Call. The commander's staff will reserve a venue large enough for the unit, ensure the sound system is functional, and prepare slides for the briefing. For those unable to attend, such as those on leave, their Flight Chiefs will distribute the slides to ensure everyone is aware of the important information. This process requires some planning and effort, but it is necessary to convey the importance of the message shared. One scriptural leader famous for effectively sharing his message in a similar way was King Benjamin.

What King Benjamin was able to do during his reign, and especially with his final sermon, showed an understanding of effective organizational communication that was unheard of in his time. His example shows me as a

leader the efforts that should be taken to ensure that when a message is important, it is not just heard—it is received.

When King Benjamin began his reign, the Nephite people were facing significant turmoil and conflict. The Lamanites were a constant threat, and the Nephites were in need of both strong leadership and unity. Benjamin inherited a kingdom weary from war and instability, and he immediately took action to secure peace. He personally led the people in battle against the Lamanites, finally driving them out of the land after many years of fear and conflict. The peace he was able to establish in the land was not just physical but also spiritual as he worked with “holy men” (Words of Mormon 1:17) to guide his people in righteousness and ensure they remained united under God. His strong leadership allowed the Nephite people to enjoy a period of prosperity and stability.

King Benjamin’s reign was defined by his unwavering commitment to service. Unlike many rulers who sought to enrich themselves, he labored “with [his] own hands” (Mosiah 2:14) to support himself and his family so that he would not burden his people. He did not seek wealth or power but instead worked alongside his people. His humble leadership created a deep bond of trust between him and the Nephites because they knew he truly cared for their well-being.

In addition to engaging in service, King Benjamin was deeply committed to justice. He firmly rejected the use of oppressive criminal punishments and slavery as a means of maintaining order, proclaiming, “Neither have I suffered that ye should be confined in dungeons” or “that ye should make slaves one of another” (Mosiah 2:13). By ensuring that all were treated with dignity and fairness, regardless of their status, King Benjamin established a kingdom where justice and freedom prevailed, free from oppression and exploitation.

King Benjamin’s commitment to these ideals earned him immense credibility and respect among his people. His fairness and dedication to their welfare made the Nephites eager to hear his words during his final sermon, knowing he always had their best interests at heart. When he called them together for his address, they gathered with great joy, ready to listen to the king who had faithfully led them in righteousness. This final sermon was King Benjamin’s finest hour as both a leader and a great communicator, marking a

defining moment in Nephite history. Not only was the content of the address powerful and transformative, but the manner in which it was delivered made it one of the most memorable events in the Book of Mormon.

Modern leaders can draw profound lessons from King Benjamin's example. By prioritizing the well-being of those they lead and rejecting self-serving motives, leaders can build credibility and foster loyalty within their organizations or communities. King Benjamin's willingness to work alongside his people underscores the importance of humility and leading by example, demonstrating that no task is beneath a true leader. Furthermore, his dedication to fairness and dignity shows that justice must be central to effective leadership. Leaders today can emulate this environment in their organization by creating situations where everyone feels valued, ensuring policies are equitable, and addressing systemic inequalities with courage and compassion.

Understanding the importance of reaching every person in his kingdom, King Benjamin organized the event meticulously, beginning with the selection of a setting that would give his words additional power. He instructed his people to gather at the temple, and they complied, gathering in great masses and bringing their families and sacrifices for God along with them. Those who were unable to fit onto the temple grounds found spots in the surrounding area, pitching their tent facing the temple to show their collective preparation for their king's sermon. Before he even said a word, King Benjamin was showing his tactical skill as a communicator. There were possible areas in the land that could have fit more people, but none would have the same impact as delivering his message from the temple. The backdrop of the temple gave his message the spiritual and moral authority that the king wanted to accompany his final counsel to the people.

One of the aspects of this sermon that makes it so iconic is that it was delivered from a tower. This was not part of the original plan, but as the king saw how many of his people were not able to fit within the temple grounds, he ordered that a tower be constructed to give his voice greater reach. This action not only made logistic sense but was yet again a message to his people before the sermon began. It showed the great efforts that King Benjamin was willing to go to so that as many as possible would be able to hear his message.

The last thing King Benjamin did before he climbed the tower and began to speak might have been the most consequential of all. The king instructed all his words to be written as he was speaking and then distributed them to those gathered. This innovative action was implemented to ensure that everyone could receive his message as intended. This attention to detail ensured that no one was left out and that the message reached every individual, regardless of their proximity to the tower.

The impact of this decision goes beyond caring for those present at the sermon; it preserved his words for those throughout the kingdom and for future generations. King Benjamin chose his words carefully, imparting to his people eternal truths that he wanted to stay with them beyond his time as king. Recording the sermon in real time made sure that his words would not be misunderstood or misrepresented. All of us have played the game of telephone and seen how even the smallest change can fundamentally alter the meaning behind a message. King Benjamin did everything in his power to avoid that fate for this important sermon.

King Benjamin's example illustrates how a leader's actions can communicate powerful messages to their people. Every choice he made, from the sacred setting of his address to the recording of his words, underscored the significance of his message and demonstrated the careful preparation behind its delivery. This serves as an essential lesson for leaders today: actions must align with values and priorities to effectively convey their importance. Thoughtful planning and preparation signal to others that the message matters, and the weight a leader places on an issue directly influences how seriously it is received by their people. By demonstrating commitment and intentionality, leaders can inspire trust and emphasize the value of their vision.

King Benjamin showed his skill as a great communicator not just in his organizational abilities but in the content of his words. As he opened his sermon, he caught the attention of his audience with words that would focus their attention on the importance of the message, proclaiming, "I have not commanded you to come up hither to trifle with the words which I shall speak, but that you should hearken unto me, and open your ears that ye may hear, and your hearts that ye may understand, and your minds that the mysteries of God may be unfolded to your view" (Mosiah 2:9)

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