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Helio Fred Garcia
Executive Director, Logos Institute for Crisis Management & Executive Leadership
Praise for *The Power of Communication*

“Helio Fred Garcia coached me a decade ago on the fundamentals of effective communication. I probably wasn’t his best student, but I count what I learned from him as one of the most important contributions to my personal growth as an executive. We’re fortunate to now have Fred’s book *The Power of Communication*, which encapsulates his enormous depth of knowledge and breadth of experience in communication—as a practitioner, as a scholar, and as a teacher. The book contains a wealth of real-life examples of what works and what doesn’t in communication, and each chapter provides a recap of best practices and key lessons learned. This book should be on the must-read list of any person who aspires to lead by capturing the hearts and minds of his or her stakeholders.”

—**Jeffrey Bleustein**, Retired Chairman and CEO, Harley-Davidson, Inc.

“The Power of Communication is an absolutely terrific book on how to communicate and lead in complex and shifting situations. Helio Fred Garcia has compiled a wealth of compelling examples to illustrate and support a cogent and immensely practical set of principles for leadership communication. The result is a compelling guide for leaders in business and government settings alike.”

—**Amy C. Edmondson**, Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management, Harvard Business School, and author of *Teaming: How Organizations Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy*

“Helio Fred Garcia is known as one of the most engaging and effective professors at NYU. Readers of this book will learn why. Only Fred could weave together tales about Abbott and Costello, the Marine Corps, and Cicero into a must-read for anyone who hopes to connect with the American public.”

—**Louis Capozzi**, Chairman, MSL Group (retired), and Adjunct Professor, New York University
“Helio Fred Garcia has had an enormous impact on my career, my practice, and my life since we first met more than 25 years ago when he recruited me to teach at NYU. I have watched him have similar effects on thousands of others. He is the man of eloquence Cicero describes. Fred instructs instinctively. His ability, which is what this book is all about, to look at critically important communication and leadership topics and issues from completely new and important perspectives, in this case the United States Marine Corps Warfighting manual, is profoundly interesting and helpful.

“The book is story after story, insight after insight, lesson after lesson, inspiration after inspiration. Just when you think it’s impossible to find another important illustration of a crucial communication or leadership principle, Fred gives you another chapter of powerful, sensible, often surprising and charming stories and lessons. Believe me, he is a persuasive orator in person and, as you’ll read, on paper.

“Looking to build your powers of communication, to inspire trust and confidence, and to lead effectively? You hold in your hand the key ingredient to a happier, more successful, and influential professional life. Start reading.”

—James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, President, The Lukaszewski Group Division, Risdall Public Relations

“Professor Garcia’s book is great news for decision-makers, leaders, and professionals in the U.S. and any country in the world. He was frequently invited by Tsinghua University to teach in our senior officials’ training seminars on crisis communication and was always remembered by our executive students as Professor Reputation Management. His class evaluations by the participating state council ministers, senior officials, and corporate leaders were always the best.

“Many thought that American methods of solving crises were not suitable for China, but Fred’s lectures rapidly dispelled their skepticism. His vivid examples, drawn from the U.S. Marine Corps as well as corporate experience around the world, made a deep impression on participants, who have since applied his practical and innovative approach to their own work. We truly believe that the book contains some very important global wisdom.
to save you in crisis in an omni-media age. The pity is that he can visit
China only once a year, but that gives us all the more reason to celebrate
the publication of this book, a very clear, concise, interesting, and powerful
masterpiece.”

—Professor Steven Guanpeng Dong, Ph.D., Chair and Director,
Institute of Public Relations and Strategic Communications, Tsinghua
University, Beijing; Vice President, China Public Relations Association;
former Shorenstein Fellow on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy,
Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

“Here’s what I’ve come to believe is the indisputable truth with regard to
leadership: **If you can’t communicate effectively, you will not lead.**

“Fred has written a book that will give anyone who desires to lead
people and/or organizations an invaluable tool for success. He provides
an organized, rational approach to communicating with any and all
stakeholders.

“Fred has taken the Marine Corps’ cornerstone publication
*Warfighting* and applied the approach and the mentality to professional
communication—and it works! I found this book to be a tremendous real-
world guide for blueprinting and executing a world-class communication
plan—and Ethos.

“This book should be kept on the desk of anyone who leads or anyone who
communicates publicly. You will use it often.”

—Lieutenant Colonel Robert Riggle, USMCR
The Power of Communication
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The Power of Communication
Skills to Build Trust, Inspire Loyalty, and Lead Effectively

Helio Fred Garcia
This book is dedicated to the memory of
my first and best teacher,
Dr. Frederick C. H. Garcia,
Professor of Foreign Languages,
United States Military Academy at West Point
from 1959 to 1984
and
to the men and women of the
United States Marine Corps.
Semper Fi!
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Foreword

By Lieutenant Colonel Robert Riggle, USMCR

If I were ever in trouble, publicly, one of my first calls would be to Helio Fred Garcia. I've known Fred for 12 years. I've been a student of his, so to speak, since we first met at the Marine Corps’ East Coast Commanders Public Affairs Symposium. I think Fred is an outstanding educator and communicator. “Outstanding” is the highest compliment a Marine can give…just so we’re clear.

I’ve been a Public Affairs Officer and occasionally a Civil Affairs Officer in the Marine Corps and the Marine Corps Reserves for the past 20 years. I’ve always put a premium on the value and impact of communications. At times, however, it felt like I was in the minority among my fellow Marines. I would often refer to a quote from General Dwight D. Eisenhower that said, “Public opinion wins wars.” Still…nothing from those around me…

In Vietnam, the United States won every major battle we fought and we still lost the war. Why? We lost public support. The same is true for many corporate and/or organizational “wars” as well. Leaders would do well to heed the warning from General Eisenhower.

I spent 9 years on active duty and the last 13 years in the reserves. If you’re doing the math and it doesn’t add up, it’s because I spent my first 2 years in the Marines flying planes. It wasn’t my calling. Despite having my pilot’s license when I was an undergraduate at Kansas University, I wanted to be an actor, comedian, and writer. Really long story…short, I quit flying and became a Public Affairs Officer. I have no regrets.

During my time in service to the United States, I deployed to Liberia, Albania, Kosovo, and Afghanistan. I also worked at “ground zero” moving rubble by hand, in New York City immediately following the attacks of September 11, 2001.
While stationed in North Carolina as a young 1st Lieutenant, I attended night school and earned my Masters in Public Administration. I am also a graduate of Officer Candidates School, The Basic School, the Warfighting course, Amphibious Warfare School, and Command and Staff College. I’ve studied and practiced leadership most of my life. Here’s what I’ve come to believe is the indisputable truth with regard to leadership: **If you can’t communicate effectively, you will not lead.**

Fred has written a book that will give anyone who desires to lead people and/or organizations an invaluable tool for success. He provides an organized, rational approach to communicating with any and all stakeholders.

Fred has taken the Marine Corps’ cornerstone publication *Warfighting* and applied the approach and the mentality to professional communications…and it works! I found this book to be a tremendous real-world guide for blueprinting and executing a world-class communications plan…and Ethos.

I currently work in the entertainment industry. My first big break was as a cast member on *Saturday Night Live*. Following SNL, I was a correspondent on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and I’ve appeared in several feature films. I’ve found that not much has changed with regard to my thought process when it comes to communicating publicly. However, as a comedian I have a lot more flexibility with regard to my message than I did in the Marines.

For instance…“Poop.” There, I just said it. As a comedian I can say that all day and no one bats an eye; in fact, it’s often celebrated. As a Marine, I would not say, “Poop.” I would say something else.

Fred is going to ask me to remove the previous paragraph, but I won’t.

This book should be kept on the desk of anyone who leads or anyone who communicates publicly. You will use it often.

I wish you all luck.

*Semper Fidelis,*

Lt. Colonel Robert A. Riggle Jr., USMCR

“Fair winds and following seas…”
Acknowledgments

This book is the result of a convergence of circumstances and the contributions and support of a great many people from many walks of life. Thanking and saluting them may take some time, so please bear with me.

This book applies to civilian leadership the strategy and leadership principles of the United States Marine Corps. And there are many to thank both in civilian life and in uniform.

Logos Institute for Crisis Management & Executive Leadership

The book reflects the client practice and intellectual work product of the Logos Institute for Crisis Management & Executive Leadership, and I am both proud of and grateful to the entire Logos team.

The actual book would not have been possible without the dedicated and persistent hard work of two brilliant and tireless Logos Institute analysts, Adam Tiouririne and Katie Garcia. They did the bulk of detailed research on case studies, fact checked, proofread, and otherwise created an infrastructure that made it possible for me to lay out the principles with meaningful and coordinated factual support. Any errors—of fact, interpretation, or judgment—are solely my own.

I also benefited greatly from contributions from Logos Institute senior fellow Oxana Trush and Logos partner Laurel Hart. I also repurposed some prior research from Logos colleagues Elizabeth Jacques and Raleigh Mayer. And I am extremely grateful for the ongoing support and help from my Logos partners Barbara Greene and Anthony Ewing.
Marines

The idea for the book was sparked in conversations I began with Rob Riggle in 2007. We were both teaching in a Marine Corps public affairs symposium in Los Angeles, and during a break I filled him in on what I was up to. Rob at the time was straddling Marine and civilian life: simultaneously a Marine public affairs officer and a cast member on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. As I recount in the Introduction, I had just started teaching *Warfighting* in my NYU classroom, and I showed Rob how I was applying Marine Corps doctrine to civilian leadership communication. Rob was my first champion for making the work available to a wider audience, and we met several times in New York and Los Angeles to imagine how the project might come to pass. I am extremely grateful to Rob for being an early catalyst and supporter of the project, and for his generous remarks in the Foreword.

In 2009 I was again in Los Angeles to work with Marines, and I met with Col. David Lapan, then head of Marine Corps public affairs, who was about to start a new job as head of public affairs for the Secretary of Defense. I shared with him the idea for this book and he asked me to send him a formal proposal. Before he switched jobs, he got the wheels in motion. Maj. Eric Dent managed the approval process for the adaptation rights to *Warfighting*. And the Marine Corps Trademarks Licensing Office gave the green light to use the Marine Corps logo. (Note: Their approval is not an endorsement of this book or of any product or project.) I am grateful for Col. Lapan’s and Maj. Dent’s support for the project.

There are dozens of Marines whose support over the years made this work possible. I am certain I have inadvertently left some names out, so apologies in advance.

I was first introduced to the Marines in 1991 by an NYU student, Lt. Col. Walter Bryzynski. For more than 20 years since, I have taught in the annual East Coast Commanders Public Affairs Symposium
in New York. The successive leaders of the New York Mobilization Training Unit-17 have been my primary point of contact. I am particularly grateful to Lt. Col. Steven Brozak, who was a strong supporter and who introduced me to Marine Corps leadership beyond the New York City unit, including the Director of Public Affairs. Other MTU-17 Marines who have been supportive over the years include Maj. David C. Andersen, Capt. Brian Lippo, Maj. Jennifer Jackson, Lt. Col. Frank Gasper, Lt. Col. David Rosner, Lt. Col. Greg Kelly, Lt. Col. Dan Fernandes, Lt. Col. Joseph J. Wiffler, and Gy. Sgt. Joseph Minucci.


In 2010 I spoke in the Marine Corps Officer Candidates School. I am grateful to Lt. Col. Carlton W. Hasle for making it possible and to Capt. Andrew Sylling for coordinating it.

The Power of Communication

New York University

I first assigned Warfighting in 2006, the first time the required Communication Strategy course was held in the then-newly-launched MS in Public Relations and Corporate Communication program. I am grateful to the program’s Academic Director Professor John Doorley for his encouragement and support of what at the time seemed to be a risky and unorthodox approach. John is also my co-author on the first and second editions of Reputation Management: The Key to Successful Public Relations and Corporate Communication, Routledge, 2007 and 2011, respectively. I thank John for all of his support for my teaching and writing over the years.

The strategy course has been taught by other professors, who themselves kept the Warfighting content and have encouraged me in my teaching and writing of this book. Particular thanks to professors Claude Singer and Dr. Paul Oestreicher. I am also grateful for the encouragement and support of Professor Bob Noltenmeier and academic advisor Guilaïne Blaise.

I joined the NYU faculty in 1998, and for most of that time I have benefited mightily from the friendship, encouragement, and support of Renee Harris, presently the Interim Assistant Dean of the Division of Programs in Business and Chair and Academic Director, of Continuing Education Programs in Marketing, Public Relations, Leadership, and Human Capital Management.

For the past 10 years I have also had the good fortune to teach a crisis management course once per year in NYU’s Stern School of Business, where I have also tested and validated many of the concepts in this book. I am particularly grateful to MaryJane Boland, Director, Executive MBA Student Services, for all of her support through the years. And to Janet Vitebsky, Senior Associate Director, and Laura Deffley, Program Coordinator, for all of their help.

The best part of teaching is seeing the change in students as they expand their horizons, enhance their skills, and grow in confidence and
capacity. It’s why we teach. I want to offer a special thanks to all my NYU students, especially those who found themselves unexpectedly required to read a military doctrinal publication in a civilian strategy course. Their affirmation of the value of the book to their strategic thinking was a big part of my own confidence that the concepts in Warfighting deserve a bigger audience.

Wharton/University of Pennsylvania

Many of the concepts of the book have been validated in guest lectures and workshops I have delivered several times a year for the past 10 years in the Wharton Communication Program, University of Pennsylvania.

I am grateful to Lisa Warshaw, Director of the Wharton Communication Program, both for her support over the years and for allowing me to quote her and to profile the Wharton Communication Program in Chapter 7. Most of my work at Wharton has been in collaboration with Senior Associate Directors Carl Maugeri and Margaret Lambires. And recently some of that work has been in collaboration with Operations Director Dr. Lawrence Quartana. Logistics for all the above have been supported by Administrative Coordinator Jarmila Force and Audio Technical Coordinator Victoria Leonard. I am grateful to the entire Wharton Communication Program.

Professional Colleagues

I am grateful to Dr. Amy Zalman of the Strategic Narrative blog for permission to cite her work on the importance of effective public diplomacy. I am grateful to Barry Mike for permission to repurpose his blog posts about his formative experience as a young speechwriter from his Strategic Leadership Communication blog.

For more than 20 years James E. Lukaszewski has been a mentor, colleague, friend, and inspiration. And I have just learned that Jim,
who had taught in the Marine Corps East Coast Commanders Public Affairs Symposium since 1986, had initially recommended me to the Symposium the year I started. For many years thereafter we were both involved. I am particularly grateful to Jim for his support and confidence over the years.

My friend and colleague Peter Firestein, president of Global Strategic Communications, invited me to speak at a conference in late 2010. That resulted in my meeting his book publicist Barbara Monteiro, who in turn introduced me to my agent, Leah Nathan Spiro of Riverside Creative Management. I am grateful to Peter, both for his friendship and support and for his catalytic role in making the book possible. And to Barbara Monteiro for connecting me to Leah. And particularly to Leah, who helped me flesh out the idea for the book and who secured my publisher’s support.

Corporate Clients

The concepts and case studies in the book have been validated in dozens of professional development and executive education sessions at various corporate clients. Because of nondisclosure agreements, I am not able to name them, even in thanks.

One, a leading financial services firm, initially had me teach a strategy boot camp for its communication strategists in 2007, the first time I applied Warfighting to a non-university civilian audience. It worked, and the client has since had me teach the module to more than 400 of its staff. For a global pharmaceutical company I have provided dozens of individual, department-wide, and large group sessions over several years. And I delivered a session for all 500 U.S. employees of a European bank.

I am grateful to all my clients (and you know who you are) for their support and confidence over the years, particularly in their adventurous acceptance of somewhat unorthodox content for a corporate setting.
Family

Finally, I thank the three women in my life: my spouse, Laurel Garcia Colvin, and our two daughters, Katie and Juliana. They endured too-frequent absences and always welcomed me home.

Helio Fred Garcia
New York City
January 2012
About the Author

For more than 30 years Helio Fred Garcia has helped leaders build trust, inspire loyalty, and lead effectively. He is a coach, counselor, teacher, writer, and speaker whose clients include some of the largest and best-known companies and organizations in the world.

Fred is President of the crisis management firm Logos Consulting Group and Executive Director of the Logos Institute for Crisis Management & Executive Leadership. He is based in New York and has worked with clients in dozens of countries on six continents.

Fred has been on the New York University faculty since 1988 and has received his school’s awards for teaching excellence and for outstanding service. He is an adjunct professor of management in NYU’s Stern School of Business Executive MBA program and an adjunct associate professor of management and communication in NYU’s Master’s in PR/Corporate Communication program. Fred is also on the adjunct faculty of the Starr King School for the Ministry–Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, where he teaches a seminar on religious leadership for social change. And he is on the leadership faculty of the Center for Security Studies of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, where he teaches in the Master’s in Advanced Studies in Crisis Management and Security Policy. He is a frequent guest lecturer at the Wharton School/University of Pennsylvania, the U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College and Officer Candidate School, the Brookings Institution, Tsinghua University in Beijing, and other institutions.

Introduction: Leadership, Discipline, and Effective Communication

Tony Hayward faced the press on a Venice, Louisiana, dock. It was May 30, 2010, and the BP chief executive officer had been living on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico for the past month. On April 20, the Deepwater Horizon oil rig had exploded, killing 11, injuring dozens, and beginning a gusher that in 100 days pumped five million barrels of crude oil into the Gulf waters. The Deepwater Horizon disaster had been the dominant story in the news media—it was All-BP-All-the-Time.

Hayward, clearly beleaguered and sleep-deprived, seemed frustrated with suggestions by the media and others that BP—formerly known as British Petroleum—and its leadership weren’t doing enough to stop the flow of oil and protect the Gulf ecosystem. He spoke in front of heavy equipment being readied to be deployed for the cleanup. In a tone of frustration, Hayward tried to show that he cared. He attempted an apology, tried to show that he took the situation seriously: “We’re sorry. We’re sorry for the massive disruption it’s caused their lives. And you know we’re—there’s no one who wants this thing over more than I do. You know, I’d like my life back.”

It didn’t work. Hayward’s statement had the opposite effect. Instead of showing he cared and that he took Gulf residents’ plight seriously, the “I’d like my life back” quote sounded like self-pity. Critics pounced. There were 11 rig workers who would never get their lives back; dozens of injured whose lives would never be the same; thousands on the coast whose lives and livelihoods were disrupted. They wanted their lives back, too.
“I’d like my life back” became a defining moment. It crystallized for the media and for politicians the apparent callowness of BP’s leadership. It wasn’t the first of Hayward’s verbal blunders. The *New York Times* had previously quoted him from an internal meeting: “What the hell did we do to deserve this?” Nor was it the last. But “I’d like my life back” defined Hayward, BP, and the Gulf recovery. The takeaway: Hayward cares only about himself.

“I’d like my life back” also became self-fulfilling. It began Hayward’s inexorable decline. Six weeks after the quote he was removed as CEO and given a make-work position; he left the company several months later. In the battle for public opinion—for trust, support, the benefit of the doubt—Hayward lost. It was a failure of leadership on a massive scale. And it began with a failure of communication. And that failure, in turn, was a failure of discipline.

Hayward’s blunder is not unique to him. It should be a wake-up call to CEOs and other leaders, to all whose leadership responsibilities require inspiring trust and confidence verbally. Communication has power. But as with any form of power, it needs to be harnessed effectively or it can all too often backfire.

This book applies the Marine Corps’ strategy doctrine, as embodied in its *Warfighting* manual, to leadership communication. It seeks to help those who engage audiences for a living—whether in positions of leadership or in communication support functions—to do so at a high level of craft.

**Why Warfighting?**

“The battle for public opinion” is a metaphor. So is “I’d like my life back.” Metaphors matter. Metaphors trigger worldviews and set expectations. As the Berkeley cognitive linguist George Lakoff notes, we tend to live our lives in metaphor, but are generally unaware of the metaphors we live by (see Chapter 8, “Content: Word Choice, Framing, and Meaning,” for more).

Take, for example, the word “strategy.” We may think we know what it means. But it’s actually a metaphor. In ancient Greek, the word *strategos* meant a general or the leader of an army. That word
 derived from two other Greek words: stratos, or army, and agein, to lead. So stratos (army) + agein (to lead) = strategos (one who leads an army). Note that stratos, army, was itself a metaphor. The literal meaning of the word is “organized formation,” as in the layers of rock on a cliff wall.

For the longest time, “strategy” or its equivalents in other languages meant only the art of leading an armed force. But in modern times it has become a metaphor for any goal-oriented activity. Business strategy is a metaphor for using the goal-oriented approach of leading an army to lead a company.

War and communication are not the same thing. But many of the goal-oriented principles of leading an effective armed force can be applied to the leadership discipline of public communication.

For example, the 19th-century Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz defined war as “an act of will directed toward a living entity that reacts.” This simple observation is quite profound. War, at its essence, isn’t about fighting or killing, at least not for their own sake. Rather, it’s about an outcome. A reaction. A change.

So is effective communication. I have long taken the metaphor Clausewitz provides, and have translated it this way:

**Communication is an act of will directed toward a living entity that reacts.**

Let’s parse this definition:

**Communication is an act of will...**

Effective communication is intentional. It is goal-oriented. It is strategic. Unlike ineffective communication, effective communication isn’t impulsive or top-of-mind. It isn’t self-indulgent. And communication isn’t just about what one says. It’s about anything one does or is observed doing. It’s about any engagement with a stakeholder, including silence, inaction, and action.

...**directed toward a living entity...**

Stakeholders aren’t passive vessels that simply absorb messages. Rather, they are living, breathing human beings and groups of human beings. They have their own opinions, ideas, hopes, dreams, fears, prejudices, attention spans, and appetites for listening. Most important, it
is a mistake to assume that audiences think and behave just as we do. Most don’t. Understanding an audience and its preconceptions, and the barriers that might prevent an audience from accepting what one is saying, is a key part of effective communication.

...that reacts.

This is the element most lost on many leaders. The only reason to engage an audience is to change something, to provoke a reaction. Effective communication provokes the desired reaction; ineffective communication doesn’t. Ineffective communication isn’t noticed, or it confuses, or it causes a different reaction than the one desired. Tony Hayward certainly got his life back, but not in the manner he had hoped.

And whatever the words one uses, we can count on audiences to compare the words to the speaker’s own actions as well as to prior words. The words set expectations; the actions fulfill or betray those expectations. Trust arises when expectations are met and is lost when they are not.

So effective communication is hard. It requires discipline. It requires understanding the desired reaction among the groups to which one communicates, which in turn requires knowing all one can about that group. And then it requires saying and doing all that is necessary—and only what is necessary—to provoke that desired reaction. And it also requires understanding the absolutely predictable consequences—both intended and unintended—of words, silence, inaction, and action.

**About the Marines**

The United States Marine Corps is the nation’s mobility force in readiness. The tip of the spear. It’s ready to deploy anywhere, any time, on any mission.

The Marine Corps is also a leadership factory. It instills qualities of initiative, teamwork, and dedication to mission. It pushes accountability down to the bottom of the chain of command, even as it holds leaders at the very top of the chain accountable for their subordinates’ decisions. Marines follow orders, but not blindly. Commander’s intent
Leadership, Discipline, and Effective Communication is an essential part of an order. Understanding a commander’s intent is the responsibility of each Marine. And making that intent clear is the responsibility of each commander, of whatever rank.

And at whatever rank, every Marine is a rifleman. Regardless of any Marine’s current function, he or she is accomplished in the use of arms. Unlike in other armed services, the expectation is that every Marine, regardless of occupation (lawyer, pilot, public affairs officer, or auto mechanic) is proficient in infantry tactics and the effective use of firearms.

Every Marine is also a spokesman. I was present when the senior Marine public affairs officer—a brigadier general—described to the students of the Marine Corps Command and Staff College the Corps’ expectation of any Marine in the presence of the news media: “Make sure each of your Marines knows this: If you’re deployed to a war zone and there’s a reporter around, we expect you to do three things:

• Engage. Speak with the reporter.
• Tell the truth. Don’t lie, but also don’t reveal confidential, classified, or sensitive operational information.
• Stay in your lane. If you drive a tank, talk about your tank. If you fly a plane, talk about your plane. Don’t talk about anything that isn’t your direct responsibility.”

This is a courageous policy, and one most employers probably would not adopt. Most organizations try to centralize press communication. But making each Marine a spokesperson is typical of the Marines. They know that the Marines’ reputation can be won or lost through the actions of any single Marine. Not just an officer, but a private right out of Parris Island boot camp. So they hold each Marine accountable. But with accountability comes authority.

Communication Is a Leadership Discipline

Whatever else leadership may be, it is experienced publicly. While it may emanate from within, it is a public phenomenon. A leader is judged based on three fundamental public leadership attributes:
• The leader’s bearing: how the leader carries himself or herself
• The words the leader uses to engage others
• The manner in which the leader engages others

These are elements of communication. And they apply well beyond the armed services.

And as a leadership discipline, communication benefits from the structures, concepts, and principles of effective leadership in other fields.

The Marines continue to enjoy a reputation as the nation’s elite fighting force. It is no surprise to me that they live up to their slogan: The Few. The Proud. They make reputation a priority, both in what they do and in what they say.

The elements that make a good Marine also make a good communicator.

How This Book Came About

I have had the good fortune to provide communication workshops and related services to Marines continuously since 1991, just after the first Gulf War ended. I had published an article that summer in Public Relations Quarterly noting that the U.S. military had embraced the principles of Carl von Clausewitz both in its execution of the Gulf War and in its public affairs operations to support the war. Clausewitz, the 19th-century Prussian general, is the author of On War, one of the most influential books of Western civilization and the basis of most modern military and business strategy. In my article, I noted that any serious student of strategy or communication should be familiar with the principles of Clausewitz. His most famous principle is that war is merely the continuation of policy by other means: The goal of the war is not to fight, but to accomplish a political objective. I argued that professional communicators could learn from him. I translated Clausewitz’s principle as follows: Communication is merely the continuation of business by other means. The goal of communication is not to communicate, but to accomplish some tangible business goal.
When the Public Relations Quarterly article came out, I was in my fourth year teaching public relations strategy and related topics at New York University, and Clausewitz was a big part of my course. Unbeknownst to me, one of my students was a Marine, just back from Iraq, and about to switch jobs: from helicopter pilot to public affairs officer. He had taken my course to get a head start. He asked if he could show my article to his commanding officer. At the same time, my friend Jim Lukaszewski had a scheduling conflict and was unable to teach his usual session at the Marines’ annual East Coast Commanders Public Affairs Symposium, an annual weeklong introduction to public affairs for all Marines east of the Mississippi who are starting new commands. He recommended me to the commanding officer of the unit that managed the Symposium, who recognized my name from the article. I have taught at that Symposium every year since. For many of those years I taught on a Tuesday and Jim taught on a Thursday. I have also taught at every West Coast Commanders Public Affairs Symposium since 2006. From 2004 to 2009, I taught in the Brigadier General Select Orientation Course in Washington, and for several years I conducted workshops in the Command and Staff College and Officer Candidate School in Quantico, Virginia.

In 2006, I was teaching in Quantico and visited the Marine Corps bookstore. There I found a slim volume called Warfighting: U.S. Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication No. 1. It’s required reading for every Marine. It lays out an approach to strategy and leadership that informs what all Marines do. Think of it as the Marine Corps Bible. While it isn’t as famous as Clausewitz, it has several advantages: It is contemporary, it is assigned reading for every Marine, and it is much easier to read.

Flying home on the shuttle, I couldn’t put the book down. Just as I had demonstrated in my article for Public Relations Quarterly that changing several words in Clausewitz’s On War provided a framework for understanding communication, changing just a few words in Warfighting led to a much richer and deeper understanding of effective public communication, both for leaders and for those who advise them.

Then I had an idea. I was about to teach a new course on communication strategy in the MS in Public Relations and Corporate Communication program at New York University. I had already decided
to assign Clausewitz on Strategy: Inspiration and Insight from a Master Strategist. The authors, from the Strategy Institute of the Boston Consulting Group, extract the essence of On War and apply it to contemporary business strategy.

I decided to supplement that reading with Warfighting, requiring students to read it before the first class. When I sent the syllabus to the department, it raised a few eyebrows. But to his credit, the academic director gave me the green light, and I posted the syllabus online.

In the first class, before discussing the book, I polled the students:

- How many were confused when they saw that the first book in a communication strategy course was a Marine Corps book called Warfighting? Nearly every hand went up.
- How many were concerned? Most hands stayed up.
- How many were angry? About a third of the hands stayed up.
- How many are still angry after reading the book? All hands came down.

I found the most counterculture-seeming student who had just put her hand down, and asked, “Why were you angry when you saw the syllabus?” She looked me in the eye and said, “I thought you were going to feed us propaganda, try to get us to like the military, to support the war in Iraq.” And now? She smiled, and said, “I love this book. I have given copies to my parents and friends. I want to know why we don’t know more about this book.”

I’ve used Warfighting continuously ever since. And I’ve used it beyond my NYU classroom. I’ve used it in strategy boot camps for the public affairs department of a major insurance company, with the communication staff of a large pharmaceutical company, and even with clergy and not-for-profit executives, sometimes to their initial discomfort. I’ve urged individual CEOs, CFOs, and other corporate leaders to read it to help them both think strategically and communicate effectively.

In all civilian contexts, my students and clients have enthusiastically embraced Warfighting, and the comments have tended to cluster into these three categories:
1. This is one of the single-most-useful insights into how to be strategic in communication that I’ve ever read.

2. I never knew the Marines were so thoughtful.

3. The lessons of Warfighting go well beyond fighting wars or communicating. The book is about how to think strategically. It deserves a broader audience.

I agree. I believe that Warfighting is one of the undiscovered gems in strategic thinking, with significant civilian application. This book attempts to do for Warfighting what Clausewitz on Strategy does for On War: extract the essence of a military manual and apply those essential lessons to the nonmilitary, professional practice of public communication as a leadership discipline.

About This Book

This book does three things:

1. It translates core Warfighting principles into guidelines for effective leadership communication. These provide an important conceptual framework, and the individual principles serve as guideposts along the journey we will take. But they’re merely the starting point.

2. It applies best practices in leadership communication drawn from my 33 years of advising and coaching leaders, and from my 24 years of teaching management and communication in graduate programs in a number of universities. This is the meat of the book—the big takeaway. It could easily exist without the Warfighting principles, but I have found in my teaching and coaching that the combination is more powerful than either standing alone.

3. It makes extensive use of case studies and examples, of both effective and ineffective communication by leaders in high-stakes situations.

All three of these strands run through the entire book. Each chapter emphasizes the leadership disciplines particular to that chapter’s topic, and closes with two recap sections: The first is the gathering
of all the Warfighting principles discussed in that chapter. The second is Lessons for Leaders and Communicators, the chapter’s key takeaways.

Organizationally, the book is divided into three parts, focused on principles, strategy, and skills.

Part I: “Leadership and Communication: Connecting with Audiences.” This takes up about half the book, and is divided into five chapters. The entire part focuses on the foundational principles of effective communication, all of which are grounded in connecting with and influencing audiences.

Chapter 1, “Words Matter,” establishes the need to take language seriously as a leadership discipline. It covers the need to adapt language as circumstances change and as audiences, adversaries, and critics react to what a leader is saying and doing. It also focuses on the need to listen and to engage for a purpose: to change the way people think and feel, and what they know and do.

Chapter 2, “Taking Audiences Seriously,” is a deep dive into understanding audiences. The leadership discipline here is to think of audiences as living, breathing entities with their own ideas, goals, plans, and desires even to be in relationship with the leader. The key is to recognize that audiences don’t think as leaders do, care about what leaders care about, or understand what leaders understand. If we are to move people, we need to meet them where they are, but that means knowing where they are and knowing how to move them.

Chapter 3, “Words Aren’t Enough,” focuses on how tempting it can be to say all the right things in high-stakes situations. But saying the right thing without delivering on the expectations that communication sets is a recipe for disaster: for loss of trust, loyalty, confidence, and ultimately of competitive position. Trust arises when expectations are met, and the leadership discipline is to align what a leader says with what the leader does.

Chapter 4, “Speed, Focus, and the First Mover Advantage,” covers shaping the communication agenda by being the first to define one’s situation, motives, and actions. The leadership discipline is to say and do what is necessary to move audiences before critics, adversaries, the media, or social media have a chance to, and then to ensure
that all communications, from all sources, are consistent and mutually reinforcing.

Chapter 5, “Initiative, Maneuver, and Disproportionality,” focuses on ways to control the communication agenda, and on outsized risk and reward: how relatively minor changes or events can have a significant effect on the outcome. The leadership discipline is to be both disciplined and nimble, to avoid making small mistakes that cause great harm, and engage stakeholders in such a timely and effective way that we get a higher return on our communication investment than we otherwise would.

Part II: “Strategy and Communication: Planning and Execution.” This section has only one chapter, but it’s a long one. This part focuses on the need to be intentional, coordinated, and sequenced in planning and implementing communication, especially in high-stakes situations.

Chapter 6, “Goals, Strategies, and Tactics: Preparing and Planning,” focuses on the need to think carefully before communicating. It shows how easy it is for leaders to get tied up in the tactics of saying things, rather than being thoughtful about how to win hearts and minds. It also notes that preparing to communicate is often a leading indicator that there are gaps in a leader’s thinking. If a leader isn’t attentive to those gaps, you can be sure that stakeholders, critics, and adversaries will be. The leadership discipline is to have a clear intent and to organize thinking, decision making, communication planning, and communication implementation in the service of that intent.

Part III: “Building Skills: Getting Good at Communicating Well.” This section focuses on the core skills that leaders need to become effective communicators. While not intended as a comprehensive how-to, it focuses on three areas that I have found leaders of all stripes and of all levels of ability need to master: how they carry themselves; how they manage meaning; and how the human brain works. Leaders need mastery of all three to be able to move people and to avoid self-inflicted harm.

Chapter 7, “Performance: The Physicality of Audience Engagement,” begins by establishing the leadership discipline of taking seriously the need for continuous honing of communication skills. Even leaders who are good communicators need periodic tuneups or they
will be less effective than they could be. The chapter then covers the basic interpersonal and group presentation skills that convey confidence and that engage audiences well.

Chapter 8, “Content: Word Choice, Framing, and Meaning,” covers how leaders can shape the frame of reference so that audiences understand what the leader wants them to. The leadership discipline is to take seriously the way that words trigger worldviews, and to understand how framing needs to precede facts. All too often, leaders believe that facts and data are convincing. The chapter explores how facts are convincing only if they make sense within a frame of reference. And there’s a first mover advantage: Whoever frames the topic first tends to win.

Chapter 9, “Audiences: Attention, Retention, and How Hearts and Minds Work,” is a deep dive into the human brain and what it means for leaders. The leadership discipline is to appreciate that audiences are human and that human nature—literally the way the human brain works—determines what audiences are capable of. The chapter is an overview of current understanding from the fields of neurophysiology, cognitive psychology, and evolutionary biology to provide insights on how leaders can actually connect with audiences and win hearts and minds.

The book closes with two summaries:

Chapter 10, “Putting It All Together: Becoming a Habitually Strategic Communicator,” harvests best practices from the previous chapters and organizes them into Nine Principles of Effective Leadership Communication. These can provide a quick reference point for monitoring your own communication leadership skills.

The appendix gathers all the Warfighting Principles embedded in the chapters and provides them in a single place, for easy reference.
In late August 2005, the communities along the Gulf of Mexico coast braced themselves for the big one: a hurricane of potentially devastating destructive power. Hurricane Katrina had passed through the Caribbean and touched the tip of Key West. Now it had stalled in the warm waters of the Gulf, picking up energy and gathering strength.

On Saturday, August 27, as the storm hovered, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco asked President George W. Bush to declare her state a disaster area, and forwarded to the federal government formal requests for assistance and supplies.¹

At 5:30 AM Sunday, August 28, the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) issued a National Situation Report. It noted that Hurricane Katrina was likely to turn north into Louisiana. The report said:

Katrina could be especially devastating if it strikes New Orleans because the city sits below sea level and is dependent on levees and pumps to keep the water out. A direct hit could wind up submerging the city in several feet of water. Making matters worse, at least 100,000 people in the city lack the transportation to get out of town.²

That morning New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin ordered citizens to evacuate the city.³ It was the first time in the city’s history that a mandatory evacuation order was given, and neither the residents nor the city quite knew how to do it. The city had buses available, but many bus drivers evacuated themselves, abandoning their buses. Residents were left to their own devices. Many, especially the poor, sick, and elderly, did not have the means or ability to leave. Others stayed
behind to take care of those who couldn’t leave. Despite the evacuation order, there were still about 100,000 people in New Orleans on Sunday night. About 25,000 moved to higher ground such as the Superdome stadium, where enough food to feed 15,000 for three days had been prepositioned. But many remained in low-lying areas.

That day President Bush went on television to reassure the citizens of New Orleans and the surrounding areas. He said, “We will do everything in our power to help the people and the communities affected by the storm.”\(^4\) FEMA Director Michael Brown also reassured the public: “FEMA is not going to hesitate at all in this storm. We’re going to move fast, we’re going to move quick, we’re going to do whatever it takes to help disaster victims.”\(^5\)

These were the right things to say. But simply saying them was not enough. Regrettably, both FEMA and the larger U.S. government, having set those expectations, spent the next week dramatically underdelivering on them. As the horror that New Orleans experienced unfolded over the next few days, the government’s lack of effective action, and the disconnect between the rhetoric and the work, became a defining moment for the President and his Administration.

**Walk the Talk**

\[\text{From Warfighting}\]

It is important to recognize that many political problems cannot be solved by military means. Some can, but rarely as anticipated. War tends to take its own course as it unfolds.

\[\text{It is important to recognize that many business problems cannot be solved by communication means. Some can, but rarely as anticipated. Communication tends to take its own course as it unfolds.}\]

Carl von Clausewitz influenced generations of uniformed and civilian military leaders through his Principle of the Objective: “War
is the continuation of policy by other means. The political end is the goal, and war is the means of accomplishing it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purposes.6

Means can never be considered in isolation from their purposes. In my teaching and consulting I pound that idea into my students’ and clients’ ways of thinking. The confusion of ends and means has potentially catastrophic consequences, whether in war or in government or in business.

And as Warfighting notes, war isn’t the solution to every political problem. It may be the continuation of policy by other means, but it is not the sole means by which policy outcomes can be attained.

I translate Clausewitz’s Principle of the Objective as follows: Communication is the continuation of business by other means. The business objective (or in the case of government or not-for-profit, the organizational objective) is the overriding goal, and communication is merely one of the means of achieving it. And means can never be considered in isolation from their purposes. Just as war is not the sole means by which policy outcomes can be met, communication is not the sole means by which business or organizational outcomes can be achieved.

In the case of New Orleans, the organizational objectives were articulated by the President and the FEMA director: Help the people and communities affected by the storm. At the very basic level this consists of saving lives. It also includes getting people to safety, providing them with emergency relief in the form of food, shelter, and medical care. And over the longer term, helping them rebuild and recover.

Much of my work is in the world of crisis. Of things going wrong. One of the key principles of crisis management is that every crisis is a business problem before it’s a communication problem. And you can’t communicate your way out of a business problem.

But all too often, especially in a crisis, leaders assume that saying the right thing is enough. It isn’t.

Communication is merely one of the ways to fulfill a business or organizational goal. But it is one of many means. By itself it is rarely sufficient to accomplish most organizational goals. Rather, I tend to think of communication as what the military calls a force multiplier: It
helps you do more, better, faster than you otherwise would be able to do. Effective communication can help accomplish any particular purpose better, and faster, and with fewer resources. But however effective, it must be paired with action that is consistent with what is said. This was the singular failure of the U.S. government in the aftermath of the flooding of New Orleans.

**Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the U.S. Government**

In Hurricane Katrina the U.S. government initially said all the right things. And the President, FEMA director, and Homeland Security secretary continued to say reassuring things in the early days of the disaster. Had they delivered on the expectations they themselves set, it would have been a positive defining moment. But in the end it seemed to be all talk, without action to back it up.

Recall also the principles from Chapter 1, “Words Matter”: Communication should be framed in order to provoke a particular reaction, and continuing communication should adapt based on that reaction. We saw neither of these principles taken seriously in the federal government’s response to Hurricane Katrina. Rather, as the situation got worse and worse, and as the government began to be blamed for not taking the steps it had promised to take, government leaders continued to offer increasingly hollow reassurances.

**Overnight, Sunday to Monday: Katrina Strikes**

In the overnight hours of Sunday into Monday, August 29, New Orleans residents’ fears came true. At 6:10 AM Hurricane Katrina made landfall, with winds of 130 miles per hour. The eye passed nearly directly over New Orleans and created a massive storm surge on Lake Pontchartrain, a form of tidal wave that wiped out lakeside communities outside of New Orleans. (I was in New Orleans two weeks later
as part of a corporate recovery effort. I saw boats on the rooftops of houses and in the high branches of trees—testament to the size and power of the storm surge.)

Inside the city, the levees that kept New Orleans dry were breached, and about 80 percent of New Orleans flooded. That morning a FEMA staff member on a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter took a photograph of the city under water, with large portions of the levee on the Industrial Canal missing. The photograph, which was not initially made public, showed submerged homes with only the roofs visible above the water.

**Monday: New Orleans Under Water**

On Monday morning, August 29, Day One of the flood, the national media had yet to arrive in New Orleans. Most of the coverage was of helicopter flyovers, of evacuees, and of government officials assuring the public that all that could be done was being done.

On Monday evening the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs at FEMA’s parent government department, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), sent a note to his boss, DHS Chief of Staff John Woods. The e-mail, from a Blackberry handheld device, was headed “FYI from FEMA.” It advised that the head of public affairs at FEMA had called to report on the current situation. The e-mail noted, “[She] said the first (unconfirmed) reports they are getting from aerial surveys in New Orleans are far more severe than media reports are currently reflecting. Finding extensive flooding and more stranded people than they had thought—also a number of fires.”

So situational awareness at FEMA and its parent department was high: Both had an explicit understanding of the severity of the damage inside New Orleans. But throughout the first 24 hours there was little visible FEMA or other government mobilization inside the city. The National Guard barracks in New Orleans had flooded, and the guardsmen there, who would have been expected to help with rescues, spent the first 24 hours of the flood trying to rescue themselves. Mayor Nagin later said that for the first few days after the flood there were at most only 250 National Guard troops in New Orleans.8
During a Monday press conference with state and local officials, FEMA Director Brown gave little indication that the response was less than sufficient. Rather, he boasted that things were going well: “What I’ve seen here is a team that is very tightknit, working very closely together, being very professional, and in my humble opinion making the right calls.” It didn’t ring true. The news media juxtaposed his statements with the apparent absence of help for those who were still desperately in need. Five weeks later, on the Public Broadcasting Service documentary program *Frontline*, Mr. Brown admitted that he had lied in that Monday press conference, ostensibly to avoid panic. In the *Frontline* interview Mr. Brown defended his lie by disparaging the state and local officials whom he had praised during the press conference. He told *Frontline*, “I’m not going to go on television and publicly say that I think that the mayor and the governor are not doing their job, that they don’t have a sense of urgency. I’m not going to do that publicly.”

That evening President Bush declared the states of Louisiana and Mississippi national disaster areas. Theoretically, that declaration set the stage for greater federal presence.

**Tuesday: The Reality Sets In**

By Tuesday the national news media had arrived in force and was broadcasting 24/7 from New Orleans, some correspondents waist-deep in murky water. And one of the recurring themes was the absence of a visible federal presence. The U.S. Coast Guard was continuing to evacuate victims stranded on rooftops, but the Coast Guard alone didn’t have enough helicopters or other resources to do all that was necessary. The media showed dozens of bodies floating in the water. They would continue showing progressively more-bloated bodies in the water for days to come.

Inside the flooded city there was no electricity, no safe drinking water, and very little law and order. Spontaneous fights broke out over scarce resources. Commentators began juxtaposing what they saw with the two statements from before the flood: President Bush’s assurance that the government would do everything in its power, and
Director Brown’s assurance that FEMA would move swiftly to help those affected. There was scant evidence of either.

Wednesday: The Situation Is Dire; Government Seems Not to Get It

By Wednesday, August 31, Day Three of the flood, the situation on the ground had deteriorated. There was still very little government presence. Many people were still stranded without food, water, medicine, or other help. The news media showed scenes of people in desperation: A young man holding a baby: “How’s a three-month-old infant supposed to survive out here with no milk, no water?” A distressed woman: “I don’t want to die like this.”

President Bush had been on vacation in his Crawford, Texas, home when the hurricane hit. He continued his pre-Katrina schedule, including a Monday–Tuesday trip to the West Coast for a fundraiser and to give speeches on Medicare. Wednesday he left Crawford for Washington, but directed Air Force One to fly over New Orleans for him to get a firsthand look. But rather than landing in New Orleans, the plane circled above the city at 5,000 feet. People on the ground, including the news media, could recognize the distinctive profile of the President’s Boeing 747, with United States of America painted on the side. Television cameras focused alternately on people transfixed by the sight, and on the profile of the plane as it slowly looped around the city. Then they watched the plane fly away. It was a metaphor for abandonment, and was reported that way.

In Washington the President spoke to the media and offered reassurance: “The National Guard has nearly 11,000 guardsmen on state active duty to assist governors and local officials with security and disaster response efforts.” That may have been a true statement. But the implication was that the 11,000 were in New Orleans. In fact, much of the Louisiana National Guard at the time was in Iraq, along with much of its equipment. New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin later told Frontline, “The National Guard was not on the ground.” The President also said, “FEMA is moving supplies and equipment into the hardest-hit areas.” New Orleans was considered among
the hardest-hit areas, but the news media reported that there was no evidence of FEMA moving supplies and equipment to people who needed it.

_from Warfighting_

We should base our decisions on awareness rather than on mechanical habit. Rather, we must act on a keen appreciation for the essential factors that make each situation unique instead of from a conditioned response.

The more the President tried to reassure, the more the media focused on the inconsistency between his statements and the reality they were seeing in New Orleans.

On Wednesday the media covered not only the lack of a FEMA presence on the ground, but also how FEMA prevented or stalled potential aid from other sources. CNN later reported incidents in which FEMA in fact hindered efforts to provide aid for those in need in New Orleans. For example, a 14-car caravan arranged by the sheriff of Loudoun County, Virginia, carrying supplies of water and food, was not allowed into the city. FEMA stopped tractor-trailers carrying water to the supply staging area in Alexandria, Louisiana, because they did not have the necessary paperwork. CNN also reported that during the weekend before the flood, Mayor Nagin had made a call for firefighters to help with rescue operations. But as firefighters from across the country arrived to help victims, they were first sent to Atlanta for a daylong training program in community relations and sexual harassment. When they arrived in New Orleans, the volunteer firefighters were permitted only to give out flyers with the FEMA telephone numbers, but were forbidden from engaging in rescue operations. The media reported not only the resentment felt by the first responders, but also how FEMA’s policies hurt those people who were begging for aid in New Orleans.16

That day Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff held a press conference in which he said, “We are extremely pleased with the response of every element of the federal government, all of our
federal partners, have made to this terrible tragedy.” That got people’s attention. How could he be extremely pleased with what by all accounts was an inadequate and disorganized response? Perhaps he was mistaken about the nature of the response. Worse, perhaps he knew the response was inadequate, but chose to lie about it, as his FEMA director had. But another alternative began to creep into the news coverage. Commentators contrasted the weak Katrina response to other catastrophes, and noted that the primary difference seemed to be the demographics of the people involved: The residents of New Orleans, especially those trapped in the flood, were overwhelmingly black and poor. Could it be that Secretary Chertoff was telling the truth when he said that he was extremely pleased with the federal response? By Wednesday commentators, New Orleans residents, and prominent African-American politicians and leaders had already begun to give voice to this interpretation. But as the next few days unfolded, it became more and more a prevalent view in mainstream news coverage.

**Thursday: Things Fall Apart**

On Thursday, September 1, the disconnect between what the government said and what it was perceived to be doing came to a head. President Bush, back in the White House, conducted a television interview in which he justified the government’s apparent inability to deal with the flood: “I don’t think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees.” In fact, a breach in the levees had been expected for years by many experts and government agencies, most recently by FEMA on Sunday morning.

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin spoke on a local radio station and expressed deep frustration, both with the lack of federal response and with the rosy picture federal officials were offering the public. He scolded the federal government: “I don’t want to see anyone do any more goddammed press conferences. Put a moratorium on press conferences. Don’t tell me forty thousand people are coming here. They’re not here!”
Over the previous few days the news media had reported that thousands of people had taken refuge in the New Orleans convention center since Monday. But by Thursday there was still little government presence there: no food, water, medicine, or FEMA staff. FEMA Director Brown did a series of television interviews in which he admitted that FEMA had been unaware of the people at the convention center.

Brian Williams on NBC asked, “Where is the aid? It’s the question people keep asking us on camera.” Mr. Brown replied, “Brian, it’s an absolutely fair question. And I’ve got to tell you, from the bottom of my heart, how sad I feel for those people. The federal government just learned about those people today.” An incredulous Paula Zahn on ABC asked, “Sir, you’re not telling me you just learned that the people at the convention center didn’t have food and water until today, are you? You had no idea they were completely cut off?” Mr. Brown answered, “Paula, the federal government didn’t know about the convention center people until today.” Soledad O’Brien on CNN told Mr. Brown, “I don’t understand how FEMA cannot have this information.” He replied, “Soledad, I learned about it listening to the news reports.” A clearly frustrated Ted Koppel on ABC’s Nightline asked, “Don’t you guys watch television, don’t you listen to the radio? Our reporters have been reporting about it for more than just today.” Mr. Brown responded, without explanation, “We learned about it factually today, that that’s what existed.” As a result of the saturation coverage, by evening Mr. Brown was a laughingstock, held up by late-night comedians as an emblem of incompetence.

That day, the President’s former communications director, then serving as Counselor to the President, urged him to watch a DVD of recent news coverage—apparently the first time the President had seen what the media was reporting.

Friday: The President Steps Up But Misfires

On Friday morning, Day Five, President Bush flew to the Gulf. But when the President landed, things went sour. First, he spoke
what became a defining sound bite of his presidency. President Bush met with relief officials in the presence of the news media. Addressing FEMA Director Brown by his nickname, the President smiled and said, “Brownie, you’re doing a heck of a job.” This was unexpected. The media juxtaposed the President’s praise against Mr. Brown’s day-before performances where he seemed clueless about the people who had taken shelter in the convention center.

The President then compounded that misstep with another one: He expressed sympathy for Mississippi Senator Trent Lott, who had lost his house in the storm. Three years earlier Senator Lott had resigned as Senate Majority Leader after being embroiled in a racially charged scandal. At the 100th birthday party of North Carolina Senator and former segregationist presidential candidate Strom Thurmond, Senator Lott committed a gaffe that propelled him into a two-week media feeding frenzy. His initial comments were widely interpreted as endorsing Senator Thurmond’s racial segregation policies when he ran for President in 1948. His ineffective attempts to explain how he didn’t intend to give that impression backfired. In the process, Senator Lott became a household name and a racially polarizing figure. The President’s explicit sympathy for Senator Lott was juxtaposed against his government’s apparent inattention to the mostly black residents of New Orleans. The racial interpretation of the government’s response—that aid was intentionally withheld because of New Orleans’s demographics—reemerged in the news commentary.

That night the interpretation jumped from the news media into popular culture. NBC sponsored a live variety program as a fundraiser to benefit Katrina victims. Dozens of celebrities performed and asked the audience for contributions to a Katrina recovery fund. During the live broadcast, entertainer Kanye West diverged from the prepared script and declared, “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.”

Mr. West’s verbalization of what some politicians and African-American leaders had already been saying added fuel to the fire, and personalized the issue: The question wasn’t merely whether the federal response was racially motivated, but whether the President’s leadership of the response set the tone.

The White House was clearly shaken by the day’s events, and its communication strategy changed.
The Power of Communication

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**From Warfighting**

We must make our decisions in light of the enemy’s anticipated reactions and counteractions.

*We must make our decisions in light of the audience’s anticipated reactions and counteractions.*

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**Weekend: Blame Game**

On Saturday, September 3, Day Six after the flood, the President spoke to the media in front of the White House. Flanked by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Joint Chiefs Chairman Richard Meyers, and Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff, the President acknowledged shortfalls in the federal response and committed to direct a more effective response. He said, “Many of our citizens are simply not getting the help they need, especially in New Orleans. And that is unacceptable.” After six days of seeming out of touch, the acknowledgment of the inadequate response seemed a heartening development. That day a larger federal presence was seen in New Orleans and President Bush ordered over 7,000 troops and an additional 10,000 National Guardsmen to the disaster area.

Throughout the weekend the media focused on who was responsible for the failed response. The federal government’s strategy for dealing with questions about responsibility seemed to take two parts: First, emphasize that now is not the time to cast blame. Second, find someone else to blame.

In fact, President Bush, his father, former President George H. W. Bush, Press Secretary Scott McClellan, and FEMA Director Brown all used the phrase “blame game” in their commentary during the period. President Bush: “One of the things that people want us to do here is to play a blame game.” Press Secretary McClellan: “Some just want to engage in the blame game.” President George H. W. Bush: “The media has a fascination with the blame game.” FEMA Director Brown: “You’re not going to suck me into the blame game.”
And throughout the weekend the top Administration spokespeople challenged the effectiveness of New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, and placed the blame for the inadequate response on them. Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff appeared on NBC’s Meet the Press and was questioned by host Tim Russert: “If you knew that a Hurricane Three storm was coming, why weren’t buses, trains, planes, cruise ships, trucks provided on Friday, Saturday, Sunday to evacuate people before the storm?” Secretary Chertoff gave a response that was, at best disingenous. He said, “Tim, the way that emergency operations act under the law is—the responsibility, the power, the authority to order an evacuation rests with state and local officials.” Even if the statement were true, it was a sharp contrast from President Bush’s and FEMA Director Brown’s assurances that the federal government would do everything it could to help those affected by the storm. But as Frontline pointed out, evacuation is a shared responsibility. The law establishing FEMA spells out: “The functions of the Federal Emergency Management Agency include…conducting emergency operations to save lives and property through positioning emergency equipment and supplies, through evacuating potential victims, through providing food, water, shelter, and medical care to those in need, and through restoring critical public services.”

But the strategy worked in the short term. News coverage shifted from Kanye West’s accusation to questions about whether the governor and mayor deserved some of the blame for the bungled response.

Monday, September 5: Self-Inflicted Harm

Monday, Day Eight of the flood, was Labor Day. President Bush’s mother, former First Lady Barbara Bush, who lived in Houston, Texas, toured the Houston Astrodome, which had become a shelter for thousands of New Orleans residents who had evacuated a week earlier. The arena was filled with people sleeping in cots, separated from loved ones, who had lost their homes and possessions. Mrs. Bush gave a live interview from the stadium with the NPR radio program
The Power of Communication

She said, “And so many of the people in the arena here were, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them.” The audio went viral on television news. The dynamic changed again, back to questions about racial motivations in the response.

Wednesday: President Bush and Michael Brown as Laughingstocks

By Wednesday, September 7, the Katrina response had moved from tragedy to farce. Comedy Central’s fake news anchor Jon Stewart gave voice to pent-up frustration. He opened that evening’s edition of The Daily Show with this: “We begin with the subject of crisis management. After 9/11 New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani emerged as a calm leader, inspiring people with hope. Hurricane Katrina has introduced us to a new breed of public servant, inspiring people—with different feelings.” He continued, “Michael Brown, the Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Brown was nominated to his post by President Bush in 2003, and intends to start the job any day now. Any day now.” He concluded, “Brown has earned widespread scorn and derision for his, let’s say, retarded mismanagement of Hurricane Katrina, and for comments like these last Thursday.” Stewart then played clips of Mr. Brown the prior week admitting that his agency learned about people in the convention center through the news media. Stewart continued, “Still, in a situation where thousands are dying from lack of food, water, and medicine, isn’t it really the thought that counts?” He then played the Thursday clip of Mr. Brown speaking with Brian Williams on NBC: “I’ve got to tell you, in all sincerity, my heart goes out to those people.” Stewart nodded soberly, then asked, “Really? Can they drink your heart? Maybe eat it?”

Friday: FEMA Director Brown Is Out

Stewart’s blistering critique of FEMA Director Brown sealed his fate. Having gone from “heck of a job” to laughingstock in one week,
Mr. Brown was no longer tenable. Friday morning, 12 days after the flood, Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff held a press conference with Mr. Brown. Secretary Chertoff announced that operational responsibility for the Katrina response was shifting from FEMA to the Coast Guard, and that Coast Guard Vice Admiral Thad Allen would take charge. Mr. Brown had no speaking role in that press conference and was not permitted to answer questions. The media asked whether FEMA Director Brown was being fired or demoted. Secretary Chertoff answered to the contrary. He said that Mr. Brown would return to Washington for an even more important project: to spearhead the government’s preparation for the next hurricane, which threatened to hit the Gulf in the next week or so. He said:

FEMA has responsibility not only to participate in this recovery and response effort. It’s got a lot of other responsibilities. We’ve got tropical storms brewing in the ocean. We could have other kinds of disasters, natural and man-made. And while it’s very important to focus an enormous amount of attention and effort to what is going on here, we cannot afford to let our guard down with respect to other things that might happen. Therefore, I want to make sure FEMA continues to be run the way it needs to be; continues to be prepared, to anticipate other challenges and I want to have people who are present here on the ground, Admiral Allen and his deputy, Joe Picciano, able to focus their full attention on what needs to be done to finish the recovery and rebuilding process.\(^3\)

That statement defied belief. The news media didn’t buy the story line, and its coverage reflected it.

**Aftermath**

That weekend *Time* magazine’s September 19 issue, published on September 11, hit the newsstands. The cover—of the U.S. edition as well as the editions for Asia and Europe—featured a close-up of an African-American woman’s face, hands over her mouth, gasping in horror. The cover caption, juxtaposed over her face: “System
The magazine included an editorial cartoon that captured the spirit of the time: An African-American man, waist-high in water, holding up a sign. It was an echo of the images the media had published for the prior two weeks, of people pleading for help. On the sign was written these words: “Leadership Please.”

On Monday, September 12, two weeks after New Orleans flooded, FEMA Director Brown resigned.

Nearly 2,000 people died after Hurricane Katrina struck. Of those, nearly 1,500 were in New Orleans. Many of those died in the days after the flood; theoretically, they could have been rescued, given medical care, food, and water. Many might have survived. Approximately 770,000 people were displaced and about 300,000 homes were destroyed or made uninhabitable.

The consequences for President Bush were significant. Until Katrina, he had enjoyed a job approval rating above 50 percent. He had won reelection in a tough campaign just 10 months earlier. But after Katrina, his job approval fell below 50 percent and never recovered. It fell first to 42 percent and a month later to 38 percent, and was below 30 percent the following year. More significantly, in the month after Katrina, President Bush suffered his first major legislative defeat. Ironically, it was at the hands of his own base.

President Bush nominated White House Counsel Harriet Miers to a seat on the United States Supreme Court to succeed Justice Sandra Day O’Connor. The President was accustomed to at least his own party endorsing his nominations. But this time the President was weak, and his base found Ms. Miers to be unsuitable. Unable to persuade the Republican leadership to fight for confirmation, a month after nominating Ms. Miers, President Bush withdrew the nomination. It was the first of many defeats in the balance of his term. He finished his presidency with the lowest approval ratings of any President.

Trust, Consequences, and the Say-Do Gap

At the end of Chapter 1, I noted that Admiral Mike Mullen, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said, “We hurt ourselves…
when our words don’t align with our actions. We must be vigilant about holding ourselves accountable to higher standards of conduct and closing any gaps, real or perceived, between what we say about ourselves and what we do to back it up.”

I also pointed out that Admiral Mullen notes that most purported strategic communication problems are not communication problems at all. They are policy and execution problems.

That was the challenge in Hurricane Katrina.

Again, Warfighting gives us a window into how this works.

**From Warfighting**

We should recognize that war is not an inanimate instrument, but an animate force which may have unintended consequences that may change the political situation.

*We should recognize that communication is not an inanimate instrument, but an animate force which may have unintended consequences that may change the business situation.*

As the government communicated, it set expectations. The communication changed the environment in which actions and future communication would be judged. One of the tangible consequences of the U.S. government’s response to Hurricane Katrina was a decline in trust and confidence—in individual leaders such as FEMA Director Brown and Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff, and especially in President Bush. Trust and confidence are not givens; they need to be earned. They can be easily lost and are hard to recover.

And one of the primary drivers of loss of trust and confidence is the gap between what one says and what one does. Per our translation of *Warfighting*, communication is an animate force that has unintended—but often quite predictable—consequences.

When leaders make promises, either implicit or explicit, they are establishing criteria by which they ask to be judged. “We’ll be there for you” was the big promise made in Katrina. The results are not surprising.
And paradoxically, the more government officials at all levels continued to reassure—that the response was going well; that Brownie was doing a heck of a job; that Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff was extremely pleased with every element of the federal response—the more trust fell. Rather than acknowledge the problems and recalibrate the expectations, the government doubled down. And, to invoke Admiral Mullen, these were not communication problems, but rather problems of strategy and execution—made all the more glaring because of the hyperbolic reassurance.

Of all the ways to understand trust, the one I have found most helpful is the description by Frank Navran, president of the Ethics Resource Center in Washington, D.C. Mr. Navran writes, “Trust is the natural consequence of promises fulfilled.”37 I take that description and add a few nuances: Trust is the natural consequence of promises fulfilled, of predictions that come true, and of values lived. Says Mr. Navran, “Trust results from having one’s expectations met, of having no unrealized expectations (what we refer to as disappointments).”38 Once an expectation is set, the leader must either fulfill the expectation or reset it, or risk disappointment that shatters trust.

Resetting an expectation may cause some short-term pain. But it’s preferable to wholesale disappointment. Take a relatively trivial example: You’re running late for a meeting. The meeting is the expectation—that you’ll arrive at a certain place at a certain time to meet with someone. If you’re 20 minutes late, the person waiting for you will be rightly disappointed, and may form a very negative impression. But if before the appointed time you call ahead and say you’re running late, you’ll get the benefit of the doubt. You will have reset the expectation. The person may still be disappointed, but less so, and for different reasons.

The same applies to big, complex expectations. Ideally, the leader sets an appropriate expectation and avoids saying what merely sounds good but is unlikely to be fulfilled. And when circumstances change, the leader can adapt to those changes and recalibrate the expectations.

But whether with an initial expectation or a recalibrated expectation, if a leader wants to maintain trust, the promises must come true.
It’s not enough to say, “We’ll be there for you.” The leader’s organization must actually be there. Predictions need to come true. It’s not enough to say that FEMA is moving supplies into the most hard-hit areas. The supplies must arrive. And they must not be stopped at the border for arbitrary or opaque reasons. And it’s not enough to profess values: Our top priority is to take care of people affected by the disaster. The leader’s organization must actually take care of the people.

And leaders need to be sensitive to self-contradictory statements. In Katrina, as things began to unravel, the federal government urged the media not to seek someone to blame—“don’t play the blame game”—even as it was blaming state and local officials for the ineffective response.

**FEMA Resets Expectations**

Two years after Hurricane Katrina, FEMA responded to wildfires in California by intentionally setting modest expectations about what it could and could not do—no more rhetoric about doing whatever it takes to help victims. FEMA’s role was limited to coordinating logistics and having state and local governments do the lion’s share of the disaster response. FEMA was widely praised for meeting those much lower expectations. FEMA’s Deputy Director, Harvey Johnson, said at the time that the response reflected lessons learned from Katrina:

> I think what you’re really seeing here is the benefit of experience, the benefit of good leadership, and the benefit of good partnership, none of which were present in Katrina. So, I think, as a nation, people should sit up and take notice that you have the worst wildfire season in history in California, and look at how well the state and local governments are performing, look at how well we’re working together between state and federal partners.³⁹

In Hurricane Katrina, the say-do gap defined President Bush and his Administration. It’s an admittedly extreme example of an all-too-common leadership failing: of confusing ends and means. Business and organizational problems cannot be solved by communication means alone.
Recap: Best Practices from This Chapter

From Warfighting

It is important to recognize that many business problems cannot be solved by communication means. Some can, but rarely as anticipated. Communication tends to take its own course as it unfolds.

We should base our decisions on awareness rather than on mechanical habit. Rather, we must act on a keen appreciation for the essential factors that make each situation unique instead of from a conditioned response.

We must make our decisions in light of the audience’s anticipated reactions and counteractions.

We should recognize that communication is not an inanimate instrument, but an animate force which may have unintended consequences that may change the business situation.

Lessons for Leaders and Communicators

However tempting, leaders must resist saying what merely sounds good in the moment. Leaders are judged on the fulfillment of expectations. And especially when things go wrong, leaders learn the hard way that they can’t talk their way out of a business problem. They certainly can’t talk their way out of a problem they behaved their way into. And once they’ve committed a say-do gap, it’s hard even to talk their way out of a problem they talked their way into.

The burden of leadership is to inspire trust and confidence by fulfilling promises, making predictions that come true, and living stated values. Communication sets expectations; actions fulfill or fail to fulfill those expectations. If the leader concludes that he or she will be unable to fulfill expectations, the leader should seek to reset those expectations as early as possible.
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