



Executive Lesson in Strategic Communication: Learning from President Obama’s 2009 Inaugural Address

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When President Obama took the oath of office he joined you and other national and global leaders at the helm in turbulent seas. Embedded within his address is a potent strategic communication lesson for any executive or manager.

President Obama (who generally writes his own speeches) used 13 communication tools to remind his fellow citizens that, as the Stockdale Paradox says, they must *“confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they may be **AND** at the same time retain faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties.”*¹

Succeeding in this is crucial for you when communicating about and in these challenging times. Here’s how President Obama did it.

Dynamic	President Obama’s Inaugural Speech	Executive Application
1. Set a Personal Tone	“My fellow citizens: I stand here today humbled...grateful...mindful...”	Be authentic, but not negative.
2. Confront the Brutal Facts	“gathering clouds and raging storms...economy weakened...homes lost; jobs shed; businesses shuttered. ..health care too costly...schools fail to many...ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet. ” “not path for the faint-hearted” “collective failure to make hard choices...”	What are the measurable realities that can be addressed?
3. Address Morale	“Less measurable but no less profound is a sapping of confidence across our land – a nagging fear that America’s decline is inevitable, and that the next generation must lower its sights.	Morale is, yet another, “brutal fact”.
4. Promote Confidence	“...the challenges...are real...But know this, America – they will be met.”	Remember the Stockdale Paradox.
5. Anchor and Affirm	...we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord.”	Solidify the foundation on which you will move through this – is it values, is it capability of staff, what is it?
6. Be Strategic	“the time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit...greatness is never a given. It must be earned.”	Major disturbances in the business environment create a clarion call for strategic thinking. Avoid getting trapped in the weeds. Devote substantial time on the big-picture both the challenges AND the

¹ *Good to Great* by Jim Collins

		opportunities inherent in the marketplace.
7. Raise a Challenge	“Our journey has never been one of short-cuts or settling for less. It has not been the path for the faint-hearted... it has been the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things... who have carried us up the long, rugged path towards prosperity and freedom.”	What’s the inspirational challenge for your team?
8. Reassure and Anchor	“For us they...traveled across the oceans...toiled in sweatshops...settled the West...endured the lash of the whip and plowed the hard earth...fought and died...struggled and sacrificed ...so that we might have a better life.”	For those who have lived through past economic tough times (remember the savings & loan debacle), it will be easy to give a personal “this too shall pass” message. For those who have not, you could base your message on those of others.
9. Lay Out the Vision	“They saw America as bigger than the sum or our individual ambitions; greater than all the differences of birth or wealth or faction. This is the journey we continue today...Everywhere we look, there is work to be done...economy...roads and bridges...science...health care...harness the sun and the winds...transform our schools... ” e.a.	What’s the vision you see?
10. Address Skeptics	“some who question the scale of our ambitions...their memories are short...cynics fail to understand is that the ground has shifted beneath them...”	Skepticism and cynicism are among the brutal facts of your current reality. Address them directly.
11. Reframe	“...not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works...<not> whether the market is a force for good or ill...the false choice between our safety and our ideals...”	Reframe the way the skeptics and cynics see the organization and its challenges.
12. Reassure and Anchor	“...earlier generations faced down fascism and communism not just with missiles and tanks, but with sturdy alliances and enduring convictions ...power grows through its prudent use; our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example , the tempering qualities of humility and restraint.” e. a.	Again, what can be drawn from the past as a foundation for moving forward?
13. Inspire	“We are the keepers of this legacy...we can meet those new threats...we will begin to responsibly leave Iraq...we will work to lessen the nuclear threat...We will not apologize for our way of life, nor will we waver in its defense...the old hatreds shall someday pass...America must play its role in ushering in a new era	What are your “yes we can” and “we will” messages?

of peace” e.a.

<p>14. Reassure and Anchor</p>	<p>“...it is ultimately the faith and determination of the American people upon which this nation relies...our challenges may be new. The instruments with which we meet them may be new. But those values upon which our success depends...these things are old. These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress...What is demanded then is a return to these truths...”</p>	<p>Find your authentic resonance and draw on the powerful themes tapped by President Obama:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hope 2. Faith 3. Unity 4. Realism 5. Ideals
<p>15. Call to Action</p>	<p>“What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility...we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world...There is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task. This is the price and the promise of citizenship...Let it be said by our children’s children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter...we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations.”</p>	<p>End with a consistent call to action.</p>

There is also an inherent rhythm and balance in the President’s use of these 13 communication tools. He shifted from personal feelings to national challenges, from flagging morale to confidence-building, from a soaring and ambitious goals to concrete fundamentals from which the challenges can be met. He repeatedly anchored and reassured – reminiscent of the “yes we can” message of his campaign. All these are lessons that you can draw on as you prepare to speak one-on-one, to small or to large gathered groups of your employees.

I also want to point out that unlike most speeches by his predecessors, President Obama addressed his audience as “my fellow **citizens**”. This is a qualitatively different phrase than “my fellow Americans”. Implicit in the word *citizens* are the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. He returned to the concept of citizenship in his call to action when he said, “*giving our all to a difficult task*” is “*the price and promise of citizenship.*” If you have employees who view their jobs as a right, not as a privilege, this is another lesson to be taken from the President’s speech.

Lastly, as a leader navigating these turbulent seas, it’s important that you are able to anchor yourself in the key messages for your organization. You might draw inspiration in these words from Senator Hillary Clinton’s hearing on her nomination to be Secretary of State, “*With every challenge comes an opportunity to find promise and possibility in the face of adversity and complexity. Today’s world calls forth the optimism and can-do spirit that has marked our progress...Too often we see the ills that plague us rather than the possibilities that confront us.*”