

Two Rules for Communication

One of the most important and most difficult skills of academic leadership is communication. In this area, I have a couple of rules that I try to apply (and live up to).

The first is the “Great American Rule.” For me, this observation began while I was in the U.S. Army. For those with no knowledge of the army: Companies report to Battalions, which in turn report to Brigades. That is important to know in order to make sense of this metaphor.

So, as a commander of a company, I was certain that I could have the best company in the army if it were not for those “communists” at the battalion. After several years, I was promoted and went to work at the battalion. I couldn’t wait to find the “communists” and have it out with them. I couldn’t find them. In fact, all I found were “great Americans” who were as smart as I was, who were as dedicated as I was, and who worked as hard as I did. For the most part, they all longed for their days at the company, where they “had more fun.” They did, however, know a secret: the “communists” were at the brigade. To shorten the story (with its—by now—predictable conclusion), I went to the brigade later on in my career and found no “communists.” Everywhere, at every level, I found only “great Americans.”

At the University of Alaska, I insist, with some success, that we trust that the person on the other end of the line or the fax or the e-mail is a “great American,” or a “great Alaskan,” or a “great colleague”—whatever term of respect you might choose that reflects your belief that the other person at another level of your or-

ganization is probably about as smart as you are, works about as hard as you do, and is, in turn, frustrated with his or her own “higher headquarters.”

My second rule for communication—a companion to the “Great American Rule”—is the “Stupid Rule.” The premise of this rule is simply that no one who has reached any position of authority in your organization is truly stupid. But if this rule is valid, the question is: why do you receive memos, regulations, and directives that are truly stupid?

At the University of Alaska, some of the truly stupid memos were probably signed by me. I have no trouble in admitting that finding out all of the ramifications and all of the consequences of an action across the entire university system is beyond my ability. Further, the almost certainly imperfect search to discover all of those ramifications and consequences before acting would slow even the glacier pace we maintain today.

So, how do we deal with the fact that people—people we know are not stupid—send us memos that are truly stupid? We invoke the “Stupid Rule”: the person who sent the memo isn’t stupid, but the memo is; therefore, I know something that person doesn’t know, or that person knows something that I don’t know, or the message is garbled. Twenty-five years of implementing this rule have shown that fully nine out of ten times, the message either didn’t say what was intended or had a phrase or a word that meant dif-

We invoke the “Stupid Rule”: the person who sent the memo isn’t stupid, but the memo is.

ferent things to different people. The problem we face is that garbled messages are most often dismissed out of hand as having been sent from “that stupid administrator” or “that stupid president.” In the meantime, the myth of the “stupid” administration hurts our communication.

The value of the “Stupid Rule” is to remind us that finding a stupid memo requires you to do something other than identify the capacity of the sender. If you know something the sender doesn’t know, tell him or her. If that person knows something you don’t

know, learn. And if the message is garbled, help to get it straight.

Another way to convey this message is to ask people to always answer their own rhetorical question. For example, someone might ask me: “Don’t those people know what this will do to my unit?” If what it will do is bad, my answer is: “No, those people don’t know; please tell them.”

Adopting the “Great American Rule” and the “Stupid Rule” can change the attitude of an institution. At the least, these rules will remind us all that most of “them” are simply “us” with a different zip code.

Mark R. Hamilton, the twelfth president of the University of Alaska, oversees the operations of the University of Alaska system. He retired as a major general with the U.S. Army in July 1998.

