

The Presidential Voice: A Framework for Strategic Communication

As president, you will be called on to communicate with your community almost every day. Whether you are giving a formal speech, making informal remarks, writing a letter to donors, or sending a campus message in the midst of a crisis, your ability to use every communication opportunity to reinforce your vision and institutional goals is an essential part of presidential success.

Here are some tips that served me especially well.

Develop a presidential communication strategy early on

The patterns of communication you establish early in your presidency set expectations for the future, so starting off on the right foot is important. Talk with your communications partners about the presidential voice you want to establish.

Choose the channels you will use to communicate and your style for each one. I recommend starting slowly. It is always easier to add channels or increase the frequency of your messages than it is to stop communicating in a way people have come to expect. The more strategically you plan your day-to-day communication style, the better prepared you will be when a crisis situation arises.

Find your authentic voice

Presidential communication is a genre all its own and needs to be practiced and honed. When you speak to your community at moments of celebration or crisis you do much more than convey information or put forward a thesis. You make meaning. You inspire action. And you create the rhetorical and symbolic imagery that undergirds your leadership vision.

As president, you are asked to speak so often because in the very act of speaking you indicate that the event is significant in the life of the institution. Your authentic voice is the one that conveys your very personal take on that significance. It draws on your history, your identity, and your range of literary and cultural allusions.

Tying this very personal voice to the broader institutional mission gives your presidential voice its power to lead. Clarity about the mission and your institutional goals can be especially helpful when deciding whether or not to “make a statement” about a national or regional crisis.

Put your students first

In a crisis your primary responsibility is to your current students. At key moments, everyone will want to hear from you. But before you speak to alumni or parents, or the press—before you speak even to faculty and staff—your first duty is to respond to the needs of your students. You can then take that student message and share it with others. It means a lot to those other groups when you send them your student-directed letter along with the words “Here is the message I shared with our students earlier today.”

The focus on students also allows you to express yourself in a way that is naturally warmer and more open than you would be if you were initially speaking to a reporter or an external audience. It makes sense that you are reinforcing the core values of the institution and offering a message of hope and comfort. Your other constituents will be warmed by this as well even if it would be awkward in a communication that was more explicitly directed towards them.

Be aware that internal communications don't remain so

Know that in a digital age every communication is heard by every constituent. When you publish a statement on any channel it will likely be shared beyond its intended audience. The memo you send to faculty might end up on Facebook where students and parents will see it. The brief speech you give at the alumni event could be videoed and sent to TikTok. Practice listening to your words from a variety of constituent perspectives.

Knowing the speed with which messages carry, I recommend making a plan to immediately and simultaneously share key messages with multiple constituencies. This is especially important in a crisis. Work with your communications team to post the message on social media and, in some cases, proactively share it with your local news media. Talk to your enrollment, development, and community relations leaders and determine if anyone else should receive it. This kind of radical transparency builds trust and creates a shared understanding of the institution's message.

Be consistent and principled

Leadership communications set precedent. Your communications serve as the record of your leadership and presidency. Leading with your principles and institutional values will help you be consistent in your messaging, as will establishing the topics you speak about and the channels you use to communicate various types of messages.

Consistency is especially important in crisis communications. When you are confronting a crisis situation you should work with your senior leadership team to define the values that will drive your decision-making. As you communicate throughout the situation you can share these values with your community. The more explicitly you define the principles that motivate your actions and decisions the more confidence you will inspire in others.

Let others communicate what is outside the presidential scope

I recommend that presidential communication focus on creating meaning and inspiring action and that it be reserved for special occasions. Transactional communications—such as reporting counseling center hours, giving the homecoming schedule, or explaining the course registration system—are best left to other members of the team. A letter or campus-wide email from the president should carry more significance when it is separated from the routine communications that every campus requires.

Widen your sources

Your readers will notice the sources you quote regularly. It is fine to have favorites—especially if they are personally meaningful to you, your institutional traditions, or your own scholarship. But quoting from sources is also an opportunity to demonstrate your range. Choosing authors from a range of intellectual and cultural traditions allows you to speak meaningfully to a more diverse audience. Of course, to maintain authenticity, your references should come from things you actually read and not just from a cursory google search for a quote.

It is also helpful to get your news from a variety of sources and ideological perspectives. Understanding what an event or issue looks like from the perspective of those whose views are the opposite of yours or even on the same side yet either more or less extreme can help you craft a message that will be heard and understood more widely.

Have a trusted diverse group of first readers and editors

Your provost, vice presidents, and other senior leaders—especially those who know your campus well—should serve as trusted reviewers. It's best if you have a communications leader on your senior team who can guide the process. But you also need to rely on other voices in your community. Before you finalize an important message, consider discussing the themes of your message with a diverse group of trusted faculty members, trustees, student leaders, and staff from around campus. These discussions will help you clarify your message and avoid inadvertent errors or miscommunication.

Choose the right medium for your message

When considering presidential communications the default is often the campus-wide email. Yet presidents today have a variety of media channels at their disposal. Sometimes a 280-character tweet is enough to let your community know you're listening. Many presidents are finding video messages are well-received by their communities; some have built their voice on Instagram and TikTok. Work with your communications team to determine the best option for your message. It doesn't always have to be an email.

Be prepared for criticism

No message will satisfy every reader, especially when you are sharing controversial ideas or a complex decision. You should assume that your messages will inspire at least some negative comments. Thinking ahead about how you will respond to criticism that comes your way is helpful. Anyone in your immediate community should get a fairly swift response even if it is just "thank you for sharing your views with me." A prompt phone call to an angry alum or a dissatisfied parent can often diffuse the situation even if you fail to convince them of the rightness of your position. External trolls can be ignored. If you anticipate a large volume of responses, enlist other members of your team to assist you in responding on your behalf.

In sum, strategic communications is an essential leadership tool. Strategy, however, is definitely not spin. Authentic, principled, consistent messages are the most effective way to

lead change and manage a crisis. Honing your presidential voice is also one of the most creative and gratifying aspects of the job.

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