You Are the Message
Roger Ailes

The Big Idea

Although this book is generally written for the public speaker, there are many excellent insights that can be easily applied to almost any interpersonal communication situation. The book is mostly about human communications and interaction. Ailes includes stories about everything from his face-to-face encounter with Charles Manson to his successful coaching of Ronald Reagan during a debate with Walter Mondale. This is one of the most powerful and highly recommended books on communication.

Key ideas

Research has shown that audience's interpretation of messages are determined 55 percent by the speaker's nonverbal communication (facial expression, body language), 38 percent by the speaker's vocal quality (tone, pitch, volume, variation), and only 7 percent by the actual words. A large part of You Are the Message is devoted to improving how you communicate on all of these levels.

We make a quick assessment of other people within seven seconds of first meeting them. We all communicate nonverbally on many different levels. It is vital to control the first impression that you make on others with some of the techniques described in the book. Try to determine what sort of instant impression do you make on others.

Once you have developed a successful level of communication, you do not change or adapt your essential self to different audiences or different media. Whether it is a conversation with a small group or a speech before a large crowd, keep your essential and natural communication style. There is no perfect communication style. You have to be yourself doing your best without any drastic changes in personality. Nobody can play you as well as you can. Perform as the "real you" at the gut and mind level. Be comfortable with who you are rather than attempt to act a role.

If you are uncomfortable with yourself, others will get uncomfortable too. Realize that you are the message. Do not change yourself because the environment changes. Rather become totally comfortable with yourself wherever you are. Take complete responsibility for the flow of communication whether you are speaking or listening.

When communicating you always have control over several factors: Time (rate of speech, pauses); space (where and how you move); eye contact; and, voice (volume, pronunciation, pitch, tone, etc.). Other things that you can control include: your state of mind and attitude; the flow of dialogue; and, the absorb-project balance.

Ailes would video his clients in a casual conversation and then in a speech situation and show them how stiff they appeared presenting the speech. He would then coach them to adopt the more casual conversational tone during their public speaking.
Besides getting video feedback, Ailes recommends that we stand in front of a mirror and try talking about a favorite topic. See which muscles move on your face. Try talking about the same issue as if you were explaining it to a child and note the difference. Ailes also recommends watching television with the volume turned down so that you can observe the facial expressions and the non-verbal communications. By learning about what yourself and others are projecting, you can eventually become a much better communicator.

Try to get feedback from others. Find out if you talk too much, over explain or lecture too often. Do you draw people out effectively, smile easily, get to the point quickly, use trite expressions or display awkward mannerisms? Are you lively or dull in the eyes of others? Getting feedback from friends and colleagues along with video feedback can be very useful for mastering an effective communication style.

Evaluate your vocal abilities. Record a speech or telephone call and listen for common vocal problems such as nasality, unnaturally high or low pitch, mumbling, breathiness, etc. To overcome these problems, buy a tape of a famous actor reading selections from literary works. Record yourself reading those same selections and compare your vocal quality. Also listen to your voice for sincerity, intensity, volume, inflection, pronunciation, and drama. Practice your control over what you are projecting.

Research shows that we have 80 facial muscles that are capable of producing over 7000 different facial expressions. Ailes recommends that we pay close attention to the nuances that others are projecting so that we can learn to project all the kinds of feelings we want.

Ailes interviewed gang leaders about how they chose their victims. He found out that these gang leaders could instinctively pick out persons with low self-esteem by the way they shuffled along with their heads down and eyes averted. Ailes uses this as an example of how people are able to make a quick assessment of body language.

Audiences tend to respond more to visual signals than verbal signals sent out by the speaker. If the speaker is somber and uncomfortable, his message is negative too. Using mental images enlivens communication. If you can see a picture in your mind and describe it, other will stay tuned in and the communication process will be more effective. Overall, audiences mainly remember concepts (idea clusters formed by the words) and emotional expressions (as communicated through the eyes, face, voice, and body).

A forced emotion convinces no one. An emotion triggered by a thought and resulting in natural expression is the beginning of mutual acceptance of ideas. Smiling originates first in the brain, then on the face. Think of someone who makes you happy or an incident that was funny. This produces a natural smile and is much more effective than a forced grin. Produce a natural smile in front of a mirror and note carefully how you look.

Ailes identifies ten most common problems in communications:

1. Lack of initial rapport with listeners.
2. Stiffness or woodenness.
3. Forgetting to involve the audience emotionally.
4. Fear of failure resulting in an uncomfortable look.
5. Poor use of eye contact and facial expression.
8. Inability to use silence for impact.
9. Lack of energy, causing inappropriate pitch pattern, speech rage, and volume.
10. Use of boring language and lack of interesting material.
The "magic bullet" of personal communications is the quality of being likable. Likeable people show optimism; concerned about the welfare of other people; have the ability to handle stress and crisis situations; and are able to laugh easily especially at themselves. Ailes believes that being likable is the most important trait to develop for the communicator.

Charismatic personalities never doubt their ability to add value to a situation, whether that value comes from the prestige of their presence, their quality of their knowledge and experience, their optimism and enthusiasm, or their distinct personality and style. Charisma is the ability to cause other to respond to you as opposed to your responding to others. It is personal confidence as opposed to the confidence imparted by a job title of other trappings of power. A successful communicator is prepared to go into any kind of communication process and change the flow of thought. This control of the atmosphere is through assertion of skill, personality, knowledge, and belief, and through the energy of enthusiasm. Winners are thermostats--they set the right temperature. Losers are thermometers--they go up and down according to the climate others set.

In all successful first meetings, a comfort level is quickly established through body language, voice tone and general interests. People who control the atmosphere don't act threatened, frightened, or superior. They treat everybody with the same comfort level and goodwill.

An ounce of energy is worth a pound of technique. Properly focused energy comes across as a magnetic intensity, an inner flame that says "I am committed, I believe, I want to tell you." Remember a moment when you knew you were communicating effectively because you absolutely believed in what you were saying. Harness that power.

Ailes has developed an "at your best" checklist of factors for effective communications: your physical appearance, energy, speech rate, pitch, tone, phrasing, gestures, eye contact, and holding audience interest.

Part of the book has technical recommendations for delivering a speech. Here are some of the main ideas:

- Don't read the introduction, do it ad lib.
- Don't read directly from the script any more than necessary. "Scoop' up the last line you are reading from a paragraph so that you can look at the audience as you say it.
- Hold eye contact with one member of the audience for five seconds and shift your eyes to the next person.
- Play to the people in the audience who feed back in a positive manner.
- Use of transitions-- past to future, problems to solutions.

Preparation. Listeners must sense that you have thought the message through thoroughly and done some preparation before addressing them. Imagine everything that is going to happen and then try to make it look easy.

Evaluate the audience. What are the audience's needs and how can you fill them? What are their interests and aspirations? Why have you been chosen to speak? Determine the purpose of your remarks. Is it to persuade, inform, entertain, etc? Decide how you can apply your special experience to the concerns of your listeners.

Preparation checklist. Determine the length of your talk and the purpose (to entertain, inform, persuade, etc.). Decide on a central theme for the speech. Gather the facts and do the research.

Consider the makeup of the audience. Hostile, supportive, etc. Find a good opening line or story that relates to the speech. Determine a structure (past to future, problem to solution, etc.)
Consider the occasion or event. Know what you are talking about. Know more about the subject than they do. There must be a purpose to your message--to inform, to entertain, to inspire, or all three.

Before a hostile audience, you will need to show understanding of all sides of an issue; before supportive audiences, you will need to reaffirm shared values.

Be interesting. Boring presentations are not tolerated. Ailes says that given a choice, the audience will always opt for the interesting but technically imperfect speaker over the one who's technically near perfect but boring.

Be committed. If you know what you're saying, why you are saying it, and care about what you are saying, you will say it well.

Don't be limited by the traditional scope of your subject. Think of analogies from other fields that can enliven your material and help the audience remember your key points.

To an audience, there are head issues and heart issues. People want to see a speaker's range of emotions expressed with commitment and colored with nuances of humor, sincerity, energy, and enthusiasm. A good communicator increases his likeability by varying cold facts with warm, genuine emotion.

Check your message for sincerity, intensity, drama, use of silences, confidence, tempo and volume. Keep the topic in perspective--realize that the world won't collapse if you fail.

Knowing when you have to be "on". Ailes uses the example of an old and tired Jack Benny coming to life right at the moment of his television appearance.

Preparing to deal with media. Know what you want to accomplish in the interview. Check to make sure that the reporter is who they claim to be. Read relevant news clips, anticipate questions, reverse roles (what would I want to know if I were a journalist?), have at least three points that you want to communicate. Try to build a bridge between your agenda and the reporters. Try to be as newsworthy as possible--with new facts, powerful examples.

Avoid being hostile or evasive. The audience will gravitate to the most likeable person.

Get the audience to pull for you. Show them that you care about them. Awareness of your own vulnerability and the vulnerability of others will make you a better and more human communicator.

Be a good listener. Hear people out. Tune into the mood of the audience and try to speak to what is on the audience's mind. Absorb other people before you project yourself. What mood are they in, are they down, up, happy, expectant? Read what people are feeding back to you.

Once again, communication is a process of shared comprehension. All communication is a dialogue, whether it is with one person or a thousand and one. People who are the best communicators communicate with their whole being. They're animated, expressive and interesting to watch.