



by Jeannie Coyle

Leading High Engagement: Lessons in Strategic Alignment from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Fireside Chats

Leaders need to engage people to put strategies into action. To build this alignment capability, learn this timeless set of four principles.

Attention Leaders— Engagement Matters

Leaders fail when good business strategies go bad. Often the problem is that the workforce does not truly understand and act on strategies. Research “from the frontlines” such as from Watson Wyatt’s 2006/2007 report, “Debunking the Myths of Employee Engagement,” shows that although engagement is a proven leading indicator of financial performance, the number of engaged employees is declining.

The research also shows that the key driver of engagement is top leaders and, ominously, these leaders are receiving the lowest ratings ever for instilling confidence in long-term business success.¹

Interestingly, little stands in the way of leaders engaging the workforce—except leaders themselves. Even better, achievable, but nuanced adjustments in how leaders operate can make a big difference.

This article draws on two dramatic episodes from the experience of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a master of engage-

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ment, who saw himself as “Educator in Chief” of the country. It illustrates four powerful lessons you can learn to align your workforce with your strategy.

Put Yourself in FDR's Place

What if your goal was to engage over a million people who were fearful, confused, lacking in trust and low on hope for the future? You must do this quickly. You can only use the power of your words to reach them—no direct contact, no visuals, no video, no Power Points. Your engagement has to be so successful that people not only grasp the big picture but start doing something they are reluctant to do—move from individual interests to what is necessary for the greater good.

That is exactly what FDR pulled off in two famous “Fireside Chat” radio addresses. What can today’s leaders learn from these examples that took place over a half century ago? You’d be surprised. Far from being dated, the principles and practices he used are as fresh as ever, can be developed and, best of all, they really do work to engage employees.

The Banking Holiday Fireside Chat, March 12, 1933.

“You have no fireplace? How do you listen to the President’s speeches?”

Groucho Marx, Room Service (1935)

This chat took place during the dark days of the Depression. Fear was high and mistrust of the banking industry was rampant. Just one week before, in a panic, people had stormed the banks to withdraw their money. The government had simply shut down all the banks to prevent total disaster, calling it euphemistically a banking “holiday.”

It certainly didn’t feel like a holiday to the American public. The mood was dark with desperation and FDR knew full well he needed to change it. Departing from the bombastic style of political speeches of the day, he deliberately chose a soft, intimate tone, as if joining people in their parlors by the fireside for a friendly discussion. Thus the name, “Fireside Chats.” The style may have been down to earth but his goal for this first chat was lofty—to explain the banking system in plain language so that people would trust banks enough to redeposit their money.

Millions of people tuned in to the broadcast, as many as listened to the most popular radio shows of the time, such as *The Lone Ranger* and *Little Orphan Annie*. With this remarkable discourse, FDR not only soothed the fears of the American public about the banking industry, he implied that it would be unpatriotic **not** to redeposit money into the banks. Amazingly, when the banks opened a few days later that is exactly what most people did.

“Do you believe that people at the front line can understand something as complex as your business strategy and financial results?”

Lessons for Leaders

1. First, check your values. Do you believe that people at the front line can understand something as complex as your business strategy and financial results? FDR strongly believed that the “common folk” had plenty of common sense and were smart enough to understand something as complicated as the banking system. He operated from an assumption that understanding had to precede commitment, if he expected people to take the right difficult steps. He viewed communicating this understanding not just as his duty but as a right of the American people to understand what they were in for. In this fireside chat he said,

“I **owe** this (explanation) in particular because of the fortitude and good temper with which everybody has accepted the inconvenience and hardships of the banking holiday. . . .The success of our whole great national program depends, of course, upon the cooperation of the public—on its intelligent support and use of a reliable system.”

The “So what?” for You

Peer into your heart of hearts and check what you truly believe about the people in your workforce. If your guiding assumptions, not what you espouse, but the ones you act upon, cause you to discount people’s ability to make sense of your business and their genuine need to know how it operates—think again. Otherwise, do not expect people to rise to the occasion of helping your company out-innovate, out-produce and out service competitors.

2. Hold yourself accountable for gaining understanding, not just transmission of information. FDR felt it was a key part of his job to figure out how to convey complex things simply. He

knew that being smart was not about explaining complicated things in complicated ways but in simple ways. His job was not to impress the experts but transfer expertise to the American public. FDR wrote his own speeches. “He looked for words that he would use in an informal conversation with one or two of his friends,” words that the average American could easily understand.² He balanced realism about the dark side of a situation, with the emerging bright clouds of hope. That way he could convey the brutal facts but still inspire. FDR had a knack for choosing the right mix of stories, metaphors, analogies and data that not only resonated with his audience but led to new understanding and aligned action. Here is an example of how he talked:

“I want to talk for a few minutes with the people of the United States about banking – not with the comparatively few who understand the mechanics of banking **but more particularly with the overwhelming majority who use banks** for the making of deposits and the drawing of checks. . . First of all let me state the simple fact that when you deposit money in a bank the bank does not put the money into a safe deposit vault. It invests your money in many different forms of credit-bonds, commercial paper, mortgages and many other kinds of loans. In other words, the bank puts your money to work to keep the wheels of industry and of agriculture turning around.”

After this fireside chat, people felt both more enlightened and more confident in the future; they rose above their personal insecurities to do the right thing for the good of the economy and the country. This is what alignment, that much touted but rarely experienced practice, looks like when it works.

The “So What?” for You

You probably pride yourself on talking about complex things to smart, sophisticated people who share a similar financial language and rely heavily on reason

and data. That is what senior leaders are schooled to do; it is very satisfying. But do you intentionally work on setting important context about your business environment, strategy and results in understandable ways that make sense to the entire workforce? Do you take charge of communications to your workforce, truly educating them with your personal message, or do you delegate it to the communications professionals or middle or front line supervisors?

One of the myths debunked in the Watson Wyatt report is that it is not immediate supervisors who play the most important role in driving engagement, but in fact it is strong senior leaders who communicate effectively and frequently.³

War with Japan Fireside Chat, December 9, 1941

“Before I speak, I have something important to say.”
Groucho Marx

This chat took place just two days after the attack on Pearl Harbor when America declared war against Japan and fully expected to quickly enter the War in Europe. Up until this time America had sat out the war but been ramping up production to become the Arsenal of Democracy—sending planes, guns, food and other material to the Allies, who were barely hanging on. Yet, productive capacity was disappointing, falling well short of the level needed to support an American fighting force on two broad fronts, in addition to supplying a good portion of Allies’ needs.

America had to master fighting well on the far flung battle fronts, but first and foremost, it had to master the home front. American production needed to grow to unimaginable levels very quickly. FDR believed that meeting this challenge required a united and expanded home front workforce fully engaged in

and whole-hearted involvement in transforming American production. If ever there was a time to “blow the doors off business as usual,” this was it.

Before the fireside chat, he requested that people have a map of the world with them during the broadcast. He told his staff, “I’m going to speak about strange places that many of them have never heard of . . . I want to explain to the people something about geography—what our problem is and what the overall strategy of the war has to be. I want to tell them in simple terms of ABC so that they will understand what is going on and how each battle fits into the picture . . . If they understand the problem and what we are driving at, I am sure that they can take any kind of bad news right on the chin.”

The road ahead would be difficult but he said that it was only a matter of time until America’s productive genius was fully mobilized, capable of giving the Allies “the overwhelming superiority of military material necessary for ultimate triumph.”⁴

More than sixty-one million adults (nearly 80% of them) tuned in, many with maps in hand for this chat. It laid the foundation for a dramatically more engaged and unified workforce pulling out all stops to reach FDR’s vision of full mobilization of American productive genius.

By July, 1943, monthly plane production peaked at 4,560 with a total output of eighty six thousand by year’s end, nearly double the output of 1942. By 1943 production rose to ninety-six thousand—almost 16 times the number produced in 1940 (6,086). Overall, munitions output in 1943 was 83% greater than in 1942, aircraft tonnage 140% higher, merchant ships 100% higher and naval ships 75% higher. Clearly that genius for production that FDR had absolute

faith in, was unleashed with a vengeance, not just because of engineering brilliance and managerial competence, but because the workforce was powerfully engaged.

Additional Learning from this Experience

3. Invest the time. During the crisis of WWII, with so much on his mind and so much to do, unbelievably, FDR spent a full five days on each of his fireside chats. These were no off-the cuff remarks shared in a folksy way. Each was extraordinarily well designed with well crafted messages aimed at specific results. In line with the advice of Mark Twain, who said, “It usually takes me more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech,” FDR carefully crafted his conversation for highest impact on understanding and alignment.

The “So What?” for You

How much of your time do you spend getting ready for communications to employees versus stockholders, analysts and customers? Can you honestly say that you are spending the time and effort to think through the content of what employees need to know—not just the “message bites” but the big picture of your business?

4. Keep the conversation going. Keep the learning growing. After this fireside chat, FDR continued to communicate to the American workforce and general population. Radio addresses were spaced for impact, but FDR chose lots of other ways to communicate with the workforce. He made many unannounced visits to factories and attended lunches, dinners and other official occasions where his remarks were covered and shared by the press—always with a finely tuned sense of keeping people on the home front educated and engaged in battle and home front progress. He set ambitious overall goals and, as they were surpassed, reset them, continually tracking results. FDR used every possi-

well laid framework, leaders of factories large and small were able to align their goals and in turn engage workers in their piece of the action. (See the insert, *Talking from the Same Page*, for an example of aligned messages and action from FDR to a shipbuilding plant manager to workers building the ships.)

Challenging the American public to grasp “a new kind of war,” waged on “every continent, every island, every sea, every air-lane in the world,” and asking them to get out maps to educate them about

the world, FDR became educator-in-chief, not just commander-in-chief. He noted, “That is the reason why I have asked you to take out and spread before you a map of the whole earth, and to follow with me the references I shall make to the world-encircling battle lines of the war.” In a very short period of time, the population became more sophisticated about the world as FDR transferred knowledge about unfamiliar places and the complex dynamics of waging war in so many places.

Talking from the Same Page: Alignment in Action

While researching this article, I mentioned the gist of it to a colleague, Colleen Sexton, head of HR for TriMet, an organization that provides public transportation for the Portland Oregon metropolitan region. She had just been looking through her parent’s attic and found not only the map they used during the fireside chats but a memo from the manager of a ship building plant in Portland where her father worked.

Thanks to Colleen and her father, Matthew Haggarty, who was an employee at the shipyards at this time, for making this excerpt available. Matthew was subsequently drafted and fought in WWII in Europe,

Although the memo does not have the panache of FDR’s chats, it mirrors the principles he employed: respect for workers’ intelligence, the need to provide the big picture and facts workers can relate to and an invitation, not an order, to engage in the greater good.

It’s a good example of alignment in action—from FDR’s messages to the plant manager to the workers who are being asked to change a specific behavior.

December 9th, 1941

Today we are at war and the necessity for the ships we are constructing is no longer a case of preparedness. We need the ships today for supplying materials to our armed forces at the outlying bases.

We have spoken to you several times regarding quitting early. In each case you have given us your cooperation and the situation has improved, but it is a temporary improvement. It may not seem a very serious matter to you as individuals if you leave your job just a few minutes before the quitting whistle blows in order to be one of the first through the gate. We appreciate the parking problems. We are doing everything we can to improve the situation . . .

There are about 14,000 men employed in this yard.* If 14,000 men stop work on the average of 15 minutes before the quitting whistle blows, the lost time amounts to 1.15 man-hours per day, or 7,000 man-hours per week. . . it amounts to one ship a year.

The morale and the spirit in the yard is good. The management and Maritime Commission are proud of your performance. Let’s not only keep this yard the Number One yard in the country as it is today, but let’s recognize the problem of quitting early.

You may consider this bulletin “waving the flag”, but the figures are accurate. You can check them yourselves to realize the time lost as a result of quitting early.

The result of your efforts here is completed ships—ships to supply the ones who are fighting to defend our families and our homes. Let’s stop this quitting early. Let’s give them a full day’s work!

Manager of Plant
Edgar Kaiser
Oregon Ship Building Corporation

* (Note: At the peak of employment, in December, 1943, the total number of workers in Portland shipyards was 98,300 and 25% of them were women)..

The “So What?” for You

What You Say

Like FDR who invested time in educating the population about the world stage by literally discussing a big picture map, do you invest in helping people grasp the big picture map of your business? To what extent do you offer support to understand the language of business? Everyone can and should know the way your business makes money and be able to interpret the story behind the numbers that drive success overall. The more they understand, the better they will be at connecting the numbers that relate to their work that in turn drives overall success.

Providing your version of a map of the territory gives people a sense of the context and fires up interest in taking responsibility for their own learning. It becomes a powerful tool for sharpening their thinking, driving the most important things they need to learn to do the most important things to grow the business. That is the essence of the alignment that constitutes business driven engagement.

The Medium You Use

FDR had radio, the new technology of the day, and he used it masterfully. You have access to a rich array of technologies. Do you not only take advantage of the variety, but also make sure that it is your distinctive voice coming through no matter which technology you use? As pointed out in the Watson Wyatt report, despite increased spending on technologies that can push out more information, faster and further than ever, the data suggest that “companies may be relying on too much technology as a substitute for frequent communication from leadership.”

In an interview with U.S. News and World Report about their new book, *Made to Stick*, Chip and Dan Heath called PowerPoint presentations the “kryptonite of

sticky ideas.”⁵ Often, these presentations, at their best, are high level abstractions. At their worst, they are speaker notes way too many slides with too many words, mind-numbing charts, and excessive numbers with impossibly complex graphics.

Stories, examples, metaphors, simple images—concrete, sensory language are what makes ideas stick and PowerPoint is not the best medium for conveying them. It should be used sparingly, if at all, when communicating with the workforce. The net effect is distancing and confusion instead of connection and understanding.

After all, people want to hear what **you** think in **your words**. Ideally they would like to interact with you in a format that makes it easy for them to ask questions and join the conversation. Do you make sure that you spend ample time in face-to-face situations and make sure that all communication, no matter what mode of delivery, carries your words and that the messages sound like they are coming from you directly, because they are.

How Often You Say It

Do you keep the “conversation” with your workforce ongoing, providing at least monthly messages about business strategy and results? People expect and respond well to a direct and truthful account, not a canned speech, and they want and need continuous updates.

Summing Up: Master Your Own Version of Fireside Chatting

FDR’s style of leadership during the Second World War was admired by many but unnerved quite a few who worked with him “at the top.” According to historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, he never sought extreme control with more rigid lines of responsibility and authority. He was not thrown by multiplicity and confusion. “As long as the home front was big

at the base” Kearns Goodwin notes, “as long as the great majority of the American people were involved in the production effort, he could afford to let things be confused at the top.” Of course, underlying this style was an enormous faith. “To his mind, there was no danger too great, no challenge too profound to yield to the combined efforts of the American people.” Adept at providing the framework, the opportunity and the inspiration, he believed the people would do the rest.⁶

Start improving your ability to be “big at the base” of your own organization.

In sum, this is not an effort requiring task forces, consultants and heavy outlays of cash. It’s about developing your skill to be the “educator in chief” by taking to heart and working on the principles recapped here.

1. First, check your values—about people’s ability and need to understand the business strategy and how your business makes money.

2. Hold yourself accountable for gaining understanding not simply transmission of information—for achieving that understanding that is the prelude for informed and committed action. Master your ability to make the complex simple.

3. Invest the time—it takes concerted, ample time to develop what you should communicate in ways that really work to educate and inspire people.

4. Keep the conversation going. Keep the learning going. News goes on; the need to learn new things goes on. Continually educate people about the big picture of your business, how it makes money, and continually share the true story of your business’s progress.

Take your role seriously as “educator in chief” and “chief engagement officer” and you will see your communication responsibilities in a new light. Rather than the occasional speech or the once a year address at a big meeting, you will

find yourself thinking about what to say, in your own version of fire side chats, that truly engage your workforce. If FDR would mobilize millions with his voice, his message and a map, surely you can lead thousands with face-to-face and effectively used digital communications.

Footnotes:

¹ Watson Wyatt, “Debunking the Myths of Employee Engagement,” 2006/2007 WorkUSA® Survey Report, page 2.

² Samuel Irving Rosenman and Dorothy Rosenman, *Presidential Style: Some Giants and a Pygmy in the White House* (New York: Harper and Row), page 92.

³ Watson Wyatt, page 2.

⁴ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1944), page 449.

⁵ Marketing Profs Online Magazine, Round Three of the Marketing Profs Book Club: Q&A With 'Made To Stick' Authors, Christina Kerley ("CK"), May 15, 2007; <http://www.marketingprofs.com/7/marketingprofs-book-club-made-to-stick-heath-kerley.asp>

⁶ Goodwin, page 607.

Excerpts of FDR Fireside Chat speeches from Miller Center of Public Affairs at:

<http://www.millercenter.virginia.edu/index.php/scripps/digitalarchive/speechDetail/24>

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