



RADICAL HONESTY

Put your cards on the table in interviews and presentations

By Sander Wieringa, communications trainer BdRP

People distrust their business leaders and authorities. Why? Because of what they do and how they communicate. Communications consultants and media trainers must therefore change course: radical honesty in place of messaging and spin.

The crises in the economy and in politics, the scandals with failing institutes and executives on the one hand, and the information society and the connected world on the other hand: the Dutch no longer believe company executives and authorities. This is evident from various signals and is reported in the Edelman Trust Barometer 2013.

In few countries in the world has the credibility of governments, companies, the media and NGOs decreased to such an extent as in the Netherlands. Meanwhile, the global trend heads in the opposite direction.

What are the consequences for communications advisors and media training? Over the past twenty years, our methodology has hinged on the core message: during presentations and interviews you must get your point across, whatever it takes! Therefore we have instructed you to 'bridge' to and 'weave in' your messages during interviews. For some time now, however, we see that people listen less to the message that you *have*, but pay more attention to the message that you *are*. In other words: does the speaker come across as honest and trustworthy? With this in mind, an increasing part of

our training is aimed at what we now call: radical honesty.

Be honest and be open: this is the basic principle. Nevertheless, keep firmly in mind what you want to get across: this is also important for your self confidence, especially with interviewers who want to catch you out. But even then, remain open and honest about why you do or do not answer certain questions.

Below are the principles of and recommendations for radical honesty.

PRINCIPLES

- The public has access to an abundance of information. We live in a connected world where we can share information with everyone. There is far more information available than people can absorb.
- In an attempt to increase transparency, regulations force organizations to disclose even more information to external supervisors. However, the public want different, more accessible information than the external supervisors do.
- The public increasingly distrusts authorities' messages and statements. People are becoming cynical and tired of spin. What they hear is immediately weighed up and filtered. They see through underlying interests and put the messages in that frame.
- Framing has become more important than the information itself. To avoid having to absorb and consider all the information, people quickly judge whether they trust the speaker or not. If they do, they listen; if they don't, they cut you off.
- People forget what you say, but they remember how you made them feel.
- Behavior and performance are more convincing than words. The real story is told by what actually happens, people feel. The way in which organizational leaders behave towards stakeholders is also highly revealing: no message can counteract this.
- Executives encounter more distrust than those with less responsibility and fewer interests in a topic. Personal knowledge and experience of the issue, coupled with an absence of vested interests, provides most credibility.
- People realize that issues are complex and that there is always more than one truth. They distrust unequivocal portrayals of an issue. In contrast, they accept doubt and dilemmas and consider a person who is honest about these to be more trustworthy.
- People are not averse to your representing your interests, provided you are honest about it. Similarly, they appreciate that not everything can be disclosed, as long as they know and understand the reason why.
- Any impression of lying, twisting or secretly withholding information is fatal to your credibility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Be good and tell them about it! In that order. Communicate through actual achievements and experiences. Show them directly or present testimonials. Let examples convey your message.
2. Don't make claims without concrete evidence. Say what you do and do what you say.
3. If you have a message but no evidence to back it up, communicate clearly that it is an opinion, principle or plan. Be honest about the feasibility of making your ideas a reality.
4. No half-truths. Acknowledge that there are more sides to an issue. Acknowledge the downsides and doubts.
5. Don't try to be perfect. Admit that you make mistakes. Acknowledge that you cannot foresee and control everything. Acknowledge that you're not a saint. Recognize and admit that you never stop learning.
6. Explain why you say what you say. Be open about your underlying interest in the issue and communicate what angle you're coming from. Put your cards on the table and generate understanding for what your interests are.
7. Facts are invaluable; opinions are free. If you mess with the facts you'll lose trust and credibility. You're free to have all manner of opinions, as long as they remain just that: opinions. Don't present them as truths.
8. Know what you know and what you don't know, and be honest when you don't know. Admit if you're not sure. Say what you hope for or are almost 'sure' of, but don't confuse this with certainty.
9. You don't have to explain or answer everything. Say when you don't talk about something, if you have a clear interest in not doing so. Express what this interest is and ask for understanding for this interest.
10. Forget 'damage control' when incidents occur. The damage is done! Don't try to portray the situation in a better light than it is. There is no respect to be gained from an accident; such respect is only generated by being open and honest about it. And by learning from it.

Sander Wieringa is owner and chief trainer at Bob de Ronde Partners, a Dutch communications training bureau. Each year Bob de Ronde Partners hosts hundreds of communications training sessions – media training, presentation training, message training – for corporate, institutional and government officials and leaders.
www.bdrp.