

Communications Primer

BASIC IDEAS FOR A COMPLEX INDUSTRY

By John Young



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THIS IS NOT an industry for the faint of heart.

Today's utility industry is one that offers constant change and continuous challenge. And as a man of humble roots, I don't purport to have all the answers to the questions that keep us up at night. But in my years in this business, I have come to understand that there are some core skills critical to a person's success in the energy industry. They include the ability to break down complicated issues, the ability to communicate in plain English, and the ability to broaden the traditional definition of leadership.

No one can deny that our business is extremely complex. The energy industry continues to evolve, and the complexity with which it operates continues to escalate, and escalate exponentially. But are we making issues more difficult than they need to be?

How customers receive energy now really is not much different from decades past. The basic tenets of supply and demand that we learned in junior high still hold true.

When I find myself faced with a complex issue, I begin by breaking it down into components that are easy to understand and then think about the basic relationships between those components. Not a groundbreaking approach, but it works, especially when one goes a step further and relates challenges at work with everyday activities not specific to the industry.

For example, a complex refinancing deal for a multibillion dollar company presents many of the same issues I'd face if refinancing my house. Most of us are able to break complex issues into components, but we stop short of drawing common comparisons that help us develop the intuition to fully understand the issue.

As important as using ordinary analogies to boil down difficult issues is using plain English in our everyday communication. Jargon and corporate lingo have evolved into foreign languages unto themselves. In this world of e-mail and PowerPoint, communication has become a lost art.

Often, we say in too many words and with much data — or worse, acronyms — what we could communicate more simply. In our complex industry what is required isn't just the ability to demystify and understand the issues at hand, but also the ability to translate for those on the outside. The test for me is being able to explain things to my friends in Milton, Fla., the small town where I spent much of my youth.



My Milton friends are intelligent folks, but not industry insiders. If they get my point, I know I've been clear with my message. This test is akin to the old saying, "Will it play in Peoria?"

The last thought I'll offer is on leadership. Often, we expect leadership only from the executive level and only from the top down. Leadership, from my perspective, should come from every employee and permeate through every level of an organization, with employees asking tough questions and holding each other accountable. Leaders should also step across organizational boundaries and invite other leaders to step into their worlds.

I often find that truly creative and original thought comes from outsiders looking in or people new to an organization. I always appreciate the bright eyes of new employees. Without the pressure to conform, they exhibit leadership of thought with enlightening questions and constructive criticism. I find that a good leader will know to broaden the definition of leadership to allow the organization to be more productive and, by default, create new leaders.

It is easy to get caught up in the complexities of our industry and the hierarchies of our companies. Change is the only constant in our industry. Under these circumstances, elementary skills are critically important to the success of energy companies and to the individuals leading them.

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News Flash >>

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NUCLEAR OPERATION RAMPS UP

Westinghouse Electric may hire 1,000 workers to deal with increased demand for nuclear reactors. The company is thinking of locating the workers in western Pennsylvania, according to the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*. Other sites are also being considered.

"We need a new location to house these people who are going to be involved in the new nuclear plant market," a Westinghouse spokesman told the paper.

Toshiba is buying Westinghouse, which employs 9,000.

A person wearing a dark cap is shown in profile, looking out of a window. The view outside the window is a city at night, illuminated with various lights, including streetlights and building lights. The scene is framed by the window's edge and the person's profile.

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