

## Effective Communication

The final test of great communication is that *the communicator* disappears, and all that is remembered is *the communication*. If someone asks you to name *good* communicators, you often have to think about it. If someone asks you to name *bad* communicators, you respond instantly. Good communication is so smooth and seemingly effortless, that people don't notice it. They just react to it. Yet good communication is a skill that requires hard work and constant practice.

"What we've got here is a failure to communicate." These words appear in the classic movie *Cool Hand Luke* (and have been repeated many times in music and movies since). The chain gang captain (Strother Martin) reacts to the cocky insolence of Luke (Paul Newman) by punching him viciously into a ditch so that he can feel the chains bite and hear them clink. Actions speak louder than words. Now he knows who is the slave and who is the boss.

There are three basic components to effective communication: form, content, and import. The chain gang captain has mastered all three components.

- "Form" is the structure, medium, or tool through which communication happens. The captain places himself higher on the slope, so that he can look down at Luke. He peers over his glasses like he is examining a distasteful object. He speaks softly because his brutality has silenced the audience. Most importantly, he understands in the field what Marshall McLuhan said in the classroom: "The medium is the message". The chains symbolize what he is trying to say in words.
- "Content" is the message itself. It is the idea, data byte, or information that is delivered by the form. "Some men you just can't reach," he says. They are destined to suffer. They deserve what they get. They are criminals who can never be rehabilitated, and sinners who can never be saved. The captain wants Luke to grasp the truth of his inevitable powerlessness.
- "Import" is the significance of the message. It is the power or urgency that demands a reaction. It is what motivates people to take the message home with him, changing their attitudes and behavior patterns. The captain knows that neither the form (chains) nor the message (powerlessness) will ultimately matter unless there is a *punch*. The punch is what lends urgency to the message. It is supposed to motivate Luke to obey.

The irony of the movie, of course, is that in the end it is the captain who has truly "failed to communicate". Despite the "form" and "content" of the captain's communication, he fails to get the response he seeks. Luke continues to defy him even to death. In so doing he inspires the surviving inmates to regain self-esteem and hope, standing up to the brutality of "the system". That makes Luke a Christ-figure, and it's why the movie was required viewing by my Methodist-Episcopal Youth Group in 1967.

Christian leaders have a lot to learn from this rather negative illustration. Turn it around. Consider how Christians shape "form", "content", and "import" to effectively communicate the Good News. My focus here will be on public speaking (sermons, speeches, prayers, and the "opening" or "closing" remarks that pastors are expected to make all the time). However, you can apply the same lessons to any form of communication.

### Form

Effective communicators of the Gospel do everything in their power to select and shape the circumstances of public speaking. This is intuitive for a few, but requires forethought by most of us. Cultural and lifestyle diversity has made this even more challenging. Unless you get the *forms* of communication right, people may never even listen to the *content* no respond to the *import* of the message.

First, do all in your power to shape the environment.

environment  
equipment  
delivery

convey  
symbolic power

## What we've got here is (a) failure to communicate

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From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

<b>"What we've got here is failure to communicate"</b>	
<b>Character</b>	The Captain Luke
<b>Actor</b>	<a href="#">Strother Martin</a> <a href="#">Paul Newman</a>
<b>First used in</b>	<a href="#">Cool Hand Luke</a>
Voted #11 in <a href="#">AFI's 100 Movie Quotes</a> poll	

The phrase "**What we've got here is (a) failure to communicate**" is a quotation from the 1967 film [Cool Hand Luke](#), spoken at different points in the movie first by [Strother Martin](#) (as the Captain, a [prison warden](#)) and later [Paul Newman](#) (as Luke, a young [prisoner](#)).

The context of the delivery of the line is:

**Captain:** You gonna get used to wearing them chains after a while, Luke. Don't you never stop listening to them clinking, 'cause they gonna remind you what I been saying for your own good.

**Luke:** I wish you'd stop being so good to me, Cap'n.

**Captain:** Don't you ever talk that way to me. (pause, then hitting him) NEVER! NEVER! *(Luke rolls down hill; to other prisoners)* **What we've got here is failure to communicate.** Some men you just can't reach. So you get what we had here last week, which is the way he wants it. Well, he gets it. I don't like it any more than you men.

The Captain's line is often misquoted as **What we have here is a failure to communicate.**<sup>[1]</sup>

The phrase is #11 on the [American Film Institute](#) list, [AFI's 100 Years... 100 Movie Quotes.](#)<sup>[2]</sup>

References in popular culture[[edit source](#) | [edit](#)<sup>beta</sup>]

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- [Guns N' Roses](#) included the quotation, sampled from Martin's speech in the film, in the opening of their song "[Civil War](#)" (1990), and later remixed it in "[Madagascar](#)" (2008).<sup>[3][4][5]</sup>
- The quote has been used in the movies [Ernest Saves Christmas](#) (1988), [Waterworld](#) (1995, spoken by [Dennis Hopper](#), who has a small role in *Cool Hand Luke*), [Major Payne](#) (1995), "Arena", [Halloween](#) (2007), [Whole Lotta Sole](#) (aka Stand Off) (2012), and on TV shows [Cracker](#), [Californication](#),<sup>[3]</sup> [CSI](#) and [NCIS](#).