

Isa N. Engleberg, NCA President, 2004

Background Notes

Both of my parents came from Jewish immigrant families. My father was born in a dirt-floor hut in a rural Russian village. His father believed the family would be better off in America, so he immigrated to the United States and started a business collecting and selling scrap iron before bringing his wife and son to Ellis Island. My other grandfather was a tailor. He and his wife also joined the early 20th century immigration of Russian Jews.



My parents were the first in their respective families to earn college degrees. It didn't bring them wealth, but it did bring them a better life than their parents had. They made sure that my sister and I were surrounded by books, the arts, and challenging conversations around the dinner table. I have no doubts these dinner "debates" gave me both the courage and skill to argue about almost anything. Then, when I was selected to be in a classroom debate in 8th grade, I discovered that there was a place beyond the dinner table to develop this skill. Thus, I joined the debate team in high school and, as it turned out, discovered my life's work.

Fortunately, I earned a debate scholarship to George Washington University and learned—much to my surprise—that, in addition to joining the debate team, I could major in speech and theatre. After earning a bachelor's and master's degree, I took a full-time teaching and forensics coaching job at Prince George's Community College in Maryland which I saw as a stepping stone to a faculty position at a four-year college or university. Instead, I was seduced by the mission and challenge of working at a community college with an extraordinarily diverse and remarkable student body—as a professor, a forensics coach, and later, college vice president. The best part of my week, however, was walking into the classroom and leaving my cares and woes at the door. There I was totally focused on my teaching goals, my students' needs, and the joy of interacting with students as varied as single moms and dads, grandparents in their 80s, active military soldiers and veterans, long-term government workers, musicians and artists, police officers (from homicide to vice), international students, future nurses and allied health workers, and, of course, traditional college-age students. Even the National Communication Association was banished to the unconscious in the refuge of my classroom.

The Journey to the NCA President

Years later, I began my final NCA presidential column in *Spectra* as follows:

I never dreamed I would become president of the National Communication Association. At my first few conventions in the early 1970s, I could barely believe I was sitting in the same rooms as well-known textbook writers and journal article authors. I couldn't even summon the courage to introduce myself for fear they would find me wanting in education and intelligence."[\[1\]](#)

If, even five years before I ran for the office of NCA president, someone had predicted that outcome, I would have scoffed. Not me. I was a born-and-bred east coast community college faculty member and female. The odds were not in my favor. The office was nowhere on my professional radar screen. Subsequently, after serving on NCA's Educational Policies Board and chairing NCA's Research Board, I felt ready and eager to assume this office. Thus, when

the chair of the NCA Nominating Committee asked me to become a candidate for the presidency of NCA, my answer was “I can do that.” I hope that my journey to this honorable office is a lesson about how an “I can do that” attitude is worth cultivating by every professional in our discipline.

Many of you may remember the children’s story of *The Little Engine That Could*. In this story, an engine pulling a long line of freight cars breaks down right before it must climb over a high mountain. All of the big and powerful engines in the train yard refuse to pull the train because it’s too hard or too much work. The only engine left in the train yard is a spunky little engine who agrees to try. The engine succeeds in pulling the train over the mountain by repeatedly puffing the phrase “I-think-I-can; I-think-I-can; I-think-I-can. On its way down the mountain, the engine’s motto changes to “I-thought-I-could; I-thought-I-could; I thought-I-could.”

Interestingly, in the published version of this story, the train engine that breaks down and the Little Engine That Could are females, while all of the engines that refuse to help are males. I use this story—not to disparage the male gender—but to personify my own analogous motto: I can do that!

From as early as I can remember, my response to most daunting challenges has been “I can do that.” When I was four years old at a summer camp my parents directed, I ran onto the stage during an amateur night performance to sing the American folk song, “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.” What I didn’t know was that there were several verses to the song. I stood mute on the stage as the audience joined in to sing the whole song. I learned an important lesson: Knowing that “I can do that” requires, at the very least, a little homework and a lot of practice. At Prince George’s Community College, I was often asked to teach several types of basic courses I’d never dreamed of teaching. Instead of refusing or making a public fuss, I’d say “I can do that!” and then would spend three or four months reading, researching, and preparing to teach a new course. The result: I learned more about our discipline and became an even better instructor.

After reviewing textbook proposals and manuscripts for publishers for many years, I reached a point where I thought “I can do that!” and began the process of becoming a textbook author. Now, as retired professor, writing textbooks and teaching ancillaries have become my career and joy.

Only three National Communication Association presidents have come from community colleges: Anita Taylor, Sharon Ratliffe, and me. Anita Taylor’s election was momentous because she earned her place on the ballot through a petition—and she won against two other candidates. Prior to that achievement, she was instrumental in creating the community college section of NCA. Sharon Ratliffe’s presidency wove a web of inclusion at NCA that lives on to this day. I was proud to inherit the Taylor/Ratliffe legacy and sought significant changes in the way we plan our convention and how we support programs that serve underrepresented members. As NCA president, I sought new and better ways to understand, respect, and adapt to the diversity of our members and serve their interests. My presidential address in 2004 advocated this goal which, I believe, is as important today as it has been throughout our history.^[2]

So much for my personal journey to the NCA presidency. I do not want to conclude, however, without commenting on what I have learned about the nature of professional leadership.

NCA Leadership

As the co-author of a group communication textbook, I continuously and diligently review the theories, research, and academic/trade book advice about leadership. Here I present five key elements of leadership that guide my thinking and behavior:[\[3\]](#)

- Model leadership behavior
- Motivate group members
- Manage group process
- Make decisions
- Mentor members

Model Leadership Behavior

NCA presidents are public champions of our discipline and our mission of “promoting effective and ethical communication.” We must practice what we preach by exemplifying effective and ethical communication. We also must be willing to roll up our sleeves and take on difficult tasks. Whether the task was helping draft a strategic plan for NCA, negotiating with members and association units, or launching online submission of convention programs, I tried to follow a golden leadership rule: Lead others as you would have others lead you.

Motivate Group Members

Regardless of the quality of my own vision for NCA or my personal plans for achieving the NCA mission, I would have accomplished very little without well-informed, motivated members. Promoting, supporting, defending, praising, and inspiring others is a daunting task, regardless of the context. I often found myself asking myself the diplomatic question “what *should* I do” as opposed to “what do I *want* to do.” I quickly realized the value of adapting tasks and assignments to group members’ abilities and expectations.

Manage Group Process

The NCA president chairs a lot of meetings and manages numerous projects. I spent what seemed like an inordinate amount of time organizing and preparing for every meeting and work session. In the case of Executive Committee and Legislative Assembly meetings, I took much more time to prepare for a meeting than to lead it. Imagine the challenge of introducing a controversial proposal or planning a workshop for the convention planners who would be the first users of a not-ready-for-prime-time All Academic system. And, regardless of the context, when I sensed a problem developing, I intervened and tried to assist members before a quandary became a crisis. I relied on the power of a clear, strategic agenda supported by strong research and well-crafted arguments. There is almost nothing as counterproductive and demoralizing as a poorly run meeting and I pledged to avoid that distinction on my watch.

Make Decisions

As the member of an academic department, a college faculty, and a professional organization, I confess to complaining about leaders who seemed unwillingness or unable to make important, critical decisions. Thus, when I became NCA president, I decided that I would make decisions and accept the fact that some of my decisions would be unpopular and that some (very few, I hoped) would be wrong. Even though many of the toughest decisions affected close colleagues,

I made those decisions by putting the needs and interest of NCA first. At the same time, I always discussed pending decisions, solicited feedback from colleagues, and explained the rationale for the decisions I intended to make. Not only did this prepare everyone for the outcome, it often helped me make a better decision.

Mentor Members

Although serving as NCA officer is a time-consuming job, I thoroughly enjoyed serving as a mentor for many NCA members. Sometimes that member was an NCA officer; at other times the member was a graduate student I encountered in an elevator at the NCA convention. When I met a member with “It,” (my word for a person with eagerness and potential as a scholar, teacher, and/or leader), I looked for situations in which they could become more involved in NCA or assume a leadership responsibilities. I reveled in their successes.

Leading a large professional association effectively is a complex and sometimes overwhelming task. Believing that “I can do that” was not enough. I also needed and benefited from having superb mentors as models and friends. A concluding excerpt from my final presidential column in *Spectra* reflects this sentiment:

The people with whom I worked most closely made all the difference. The giants who awed me when I joined NCA are now my friends and mentors. Perhaps I’m still star-struck, but I count myself lucky to have worked very closely with so many NCA officers.[\[4\]](#)

Fulfilling Our Mission

In 1995, the (now defunct) Association for Communication Administration joined forces with the National Communication Association to sponsor a “Conference on Defining the Field of Communication.” More than 100 prominent communication scholars and educators met for two days to produce a definition that describes what we do. The communication discipline: “focuses on how people use verbal and nonverbal messages to generate meaning within and across various contexts, cultures, channels, and media. The field promotes the effective and ethical practice of human communication.”[\[5\]](#)

Part of this definition—to promote effective and ethical communication—is now the centerpiece of the National Communication Association mission. I trust that our current officers and those who (like me, never dreamed of becoming NCA president) will make this mission their guiding principle.

Despite the facts that my eyes look toward the future of our discipline, I end this missive with words from the past—the preface to William Norwood Brigance’s *Speech Composition*, 2nd edition, published in 1953. Keep in mind that the first edition (1937) was written before World War II began whereas his second edition was published during the cold war era in which we feared subjugation or annihilation by communists wielding weapons of mass destruction. I would ask you to think about our own era and then contemplate the critical responsibilities we inherit as communication professionals.[\[6\]](#) Brigance observed that we have “two methods for settling differences—shoot it out, or talk it out.”[\[7\]](#) He followed this observation with these words: Both require skill. Both require discipline. Both require training. If a society wants to become free, or to remain free, it must develop leaders who have skill, discipline, and training in how to talk it out.

At the first writing of this book, all of this was dimly seen by some and seen not at all by others. But the years of accumulating crisis have made it crystal clear, and have given it a dreadful

urgency. I might dedicate the revision, therefore, to those students who will use the book, and who perform live in a world in which they must “persuade or perish.”

The NCA mission statement declares our goal is to promote effective and ethical communication. I believe that no other discipline has the potential to achieve Brigrance’s goal of helping the world learn how to communicate. Every member of the National Communication Association and our discipline—be they officers or fledgling faculty members—inherits this call to put effective communication at the center of enlightened liberal education, genuine civic engagement, and ethical communication.

NOTES

[1] Isa N. Engleberg (December 2004), “Walking with Giants,” *Spectra*, Vol. 40, No. 12, p. 3.

[2] Isa N. Engleberg (January 2005), “Diversity Redux,” *Spectra*, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 4-7.

[3] The fact that these elements of leadership all begin with the letter **M** reflects the ways in my experiences as a leader have become central to the way I look at and teach leadership theories and skills. The multiple **M**s have helped my students learn and remember key leadership challenges.

[4] Engleberg (December 2004).

[5] The Definition of the Field of Communication statement can be found on the NCA website: <http://www.natcom.org/>

[6] William Norwood Brigrance, *Speech Composition*, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953).

[7] Brigrance, p. vi.