

The Stagecraft of Leadership

Your voice is your currency. Spend it like you're a billionaire.

—Kevin Smith

Buckingham Palace and the Queen's Christmas Address

In 2018, I was offered an extraordinary opportunity—one I never could have imagined when I cofounded Pinnacle back in 2005. I was invited to London, on behalf of the Queen of England, to address the Royal Household at Buckingham Palace. Like most people, I had never been inside the 775-room palace, so, of course, I was thrilled to receive the invitation. I eagerly spent the next few weeks designing a custom program, tailoring content that I hoped would resonate with this unique audience, and preparing to deliver a memorable session.

Just days before my departure, I was at my daughter's high school soccer game when I ran into my friend David Murray, executive director of the Professional Speechwriters Association. When I told David about my upcoming engagement with the Queen's team, he was excited for me but posed a question that struck me with an unexpected wave of uncertainty: "How do you think they're going to feel about an American coming to teach them about communication?" Until that moment, I hadn't considered the potential challenge of connecting with a British royal team. Despite my experience—having

written two books on communication and working with executives worldwide for more than 15 years—I suddenly felt a surge of self-doubt. What if they didn't respond to me? What if I couldn't bridge the gap?

As the game ended and we parted ways, David wished me well and mentioned something interesting: the Queen's 1957 Christmas address to the nation, her first televised speech. I'd never seen it, but David said it was a powerful example of the Queen's poise and grace, particularly a very human moment at the end of the broadcast when her face lights up with pride after delivering her message so flawlessly. He promised to send it to me, and I left the conversation slightly reassured, knowing I had that video in my back pocket if I needed it.

On arriving in London and passing through Buckingham Palace's multiple security layers, I was escorted into the most beautiful training room I'd ever seen. Ornate ceilings, dramatic doors, and priceless artwork filled the space, and I couldn't help but pause, taking in the grandeur—especially considering I grew up in a small farm town in Minnesota. But as the Royal Household team began to assemble, the old doubts crept back in. What if they didn't respond to my content? What if I couldn't make a meaningful connection?

Then, something unexpected happened. After introducing myself and setting the agenda, I decided on a whim to reference the Queen's 1957 Christmas address. I asked the group if they had ever seen it. Surprisingly, none of them had, and a few had never even heard of it. I could see their curiosity piqued, so I asked if they'd like to watch it. They enthusiastically agreed, and we all watched the Queen's first televised Christmas message as a group.

That spontaneous choice turned out to be a brilliant icebreaker. Not only did it instantly build a bond between me and the Queen's staff, but it also gave them a rare glimpse of their boss in a completely different light. By sharing something they hadn't seen before, I established

credibility and earned their trust. The session, which had started with my own nerves, quickly turned into an engaging and meaningful experience, setting the tone for a day of connection and collaboration with the Royal Household.

How Leaders Connect with Their Audiences: Objective and Intention

Constantin Stanislavski, the founder of the Moscow Art Theatre and the father of modern acting, always believed that the best communication occurs when there's a moment of understanding between two human beings—whether that happens onstage or off. Stanislavski focused extensively on authenticity and true emotional connections between actors to create compelling performances, and many of his concepts and methods can be used by nonactors to improve leadership communication and influence.

Effective leaders, much like skilled actors, begin by identifying a clear *objective*—a specific goal or outcome they intend to achieve with their audience. As Stanislavski explained, “Life, people, circumstances . . . constantly put up barriers . . . Each of these barriers presents us with the objective of getting through it . . . Every one of the objectives you have chosen . . . calls for some degree of action.”¹

Whether you are a salesperson motivating a client to buy, a human resources manager implementing a new process, or a clownfish named Nemo trying to get back to your family, you are pursuing something—a goal or result—that is important to you. Both actors and leaders pursue specific objectives at every moment, and the success of their message depends on their ability to influence emotions. Ken Howard, an Emmy and Tony Award-winning actor and Harvard professor, explains it this way: “Just like an actor, an effective communicator must have a clear objective and then take deliberate actions to fulfill it . . . capturing attention, leaving an impression, and

persuading others to act—whether that means buying a product, choosing you over competitors, or making a critical decision.”²

Throughout history, leaders have honed their communication skills by drawing on the techniques of professional actors, dating as far back as 360 BCE, when the actor Satyrus transformed the Athenian statesman Demosthenes into one of the most dynamic orators of all time. Demosthenes had struggled to capture the attention of his audiences, feeling frustrated that his speeches, despite his intense effort, were often ignored. Satyrus noticed that Demosthenes’s delivery lacked the expressive qualities needed to truly engage an audience. To demonstrate the power of delivery, Satyrus taught Demosthenes how physical presence and vocal modulation could dramatically enhance the impact of a speech. Satyrus’s guidance was instrumental in helping Demosthenes shift from focusing solely on content to honing his delivery, significantly improving his impact as a speaker.³

In the Academy Award–winning film *The King’s Speech*, Great Britain’s King George VI, struggling with a debilitating stammer, reluctantly seeks help from an unorthodox speech therapist, an Australian actor named Lionel Logue. Through unconventional techniques, which combined vocal exercises with breath work, Logue helped King George find his voice and the confidence needed to deliver a crucial wartime radio speech meant to inspire and unite the British people on the brink of World War II.

In 1960, ahead of the first televised US presidential debate in history, John F. Kennedy enlisted Hollywood director Arthur Penn to help him refine his on-camera presence. Penn advised Kennedy to look directly into the camera lens during the debate and keep his responses concise. Those tips, along with Kennedy’s calm, confident demeanor, helped him appear more polished and credible than his opponent, Richard Nixon. This debate is often credited with giving Kennedy an edge with voters, showcasing the power of presence.⁴

Margaret Thatcher, Britain's first female prime minister, also sought acting guidance to strengthen her public image. Initially perceived as dowdy, with a shrill voice, Thatcher's advisor, television producer Gordon Reece (with an assist from actor Lawrence Olivier), arranged for her to study with a coach from the Royal National Theatre. This training helped Thatcher lower her vocal pitch, develop a more commanding tone, and refine her physical appearance, contributing to her authoritative persona.⁵

Before becoming president of the United States, Ronald Reagan enjoyed a successful career as a well-known movie star. Having spent years in Hollywood, Reagan developed a confident on-camera presence, an ability to project warmth and charisma, and a knack for storytelling—skills that proved essential in politics. Other notable leaders have also worked with acting coaches, including Barack and Michelle Obama, Bill and Hillary Clinton, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Oprah Winfrey, Justin Trudeau, and Robert F. Kennedy. All have employed acting techniques to refine their speaking skills. Boxer Mike Tyson performed in a one-man show on Broadway directed by Spike Lee, and Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, a longtime theater lover, recently made her Broadway debut acting in *É Juliet*. Even Dale Carnegie, the legendary author of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, began his journey as an actor. His experience on stage helped shape his understanding of effective communication, which later became central to his teachings.

Before becoming the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy launched his career as a comedian and actor, most famously portraying the president of Ukraine in the sitcom *Servant of the People*—a role he would later step into in real life. His acting background enhanced his ability to deliver impactful speeches and connect with audiences, shaping public opinion both domestically and internationally, especially during Ukraine's protracted conflict with Russia.

In the 2024 presidential election in the United States, candidates Donald Trump and Kamala Harris both tapped into actor-based techniques to motivate and inspire the electorate. Trump’s extensive television appearances over the years, from *Saturday Night Live* to *WrestleMania*, sharpened his skill in commanding public attention. Harris, in turn, worked with an acting coach to prepare for debates and interviews. By borrowing from the actor’s toolkit, leaders like Trump and Harris enhance their ability to connect, communicate, and inspire—an invaluable advantage in the political arena.

Influencing an audience involves aligning your intention with your delivery. This can be achieved by activating specific “intention cues”—something we’ll explore in Chapter 5. By consciously managing elements such as vocal dynamics, body language, and facial expressions, a speaker can shape how their audience perceives them, ultimately influencing emotions and motivating action. The Pinnacle Method, a three-step process for impactful communication, is based on this principle. It provides a clear framework to guide you through these steps:

Step 1: Analyze your audience.

Step 2: Identify a desired outcome.

Step 3: Modify your delivery accordingly.

This methodology combines a strategic psychological approach rooted in neuroscience with the actor’s mindset of objective and intention to drive meaningful behavior change. I’ll break down the three-step process in more detail shortly, but first, let’s define two key concepts: objective and intention.

Objective

An *objective* for a speaker or actor represents something they want or need from their audience; it is the goal being pursued that drives

their communication and actions. For example, the objective for an actor playing detective Hercule Poirot might be to identify the killer before they strike again, while the objective for Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* is to return home to Kansas to reunite with her family. Every action Poirot and Dorothy take, and every interaction in which they engage, should be in service to that purpose.

Similarly, a leader in a corporate setting must approach their objectives with the same clarity and focus. Whether you're a sales manager motivating your team to hit a target, a real estate agent persuading your buyer to make an offer, or a teacher making US history come alive for your students, success depends on pursuing a clear objective. Entering a meeting or presentation without a well-defined goal is like running a race without knowing where the finish line is: it undermines purpose and makes success difficult to achieve.

Having a specific objective also helps leaders demonstrate passion and purpose, focusing their message and enhancing their delivery, just as it does for professional actors. As Stanislavski observed, "When an actor is completely absorbed by some profoundly moving objective . . . he throws his whole being passionately into its execution."⁶ One key difference between actors and leaders lies in their relationship to objectives. In a scene, actors are often driven by conflicting goals, which is what generates the tension and drama. By contrast, a leader's role is to *align* the objectives of their team members, minimizing conflict and fostering collaboration in the pursuit of a common purpose.

Intention

The second part of the equation is intention. In our 2012 book *The Pin Drop Principle*, we described intention as the "rocket fuel" behind your words. In our book *The Bullseye Principle*, we explored how intention helps speakers connect with their audience and hit the bullseye with their message. Put simply: intention determines

outcome, creating an emotional resonance that propels you toward your objective. Steven Bartlett, the popular British entrepreneur and podcaster, puts it this way: “Intention is nothing without action, but action is nothing without intention. Progress happens when your intentions and actions become the same thing.”⁷ Setting a strong intention and expressing it clearly through your words and delivery will help create a compelling message.

Intentional communication can “make sparks fly”—not just in fiery debates, but in dynamic, engaging conversations that energize and influence. When we speak with purpose, we spark energy, creativity, and connection, turning ordinary interactions into moments of growth and insight. Communicating with intention is about cultivating meaningful exchanges that achieve results and inspire action. As the late scholar and business thinker Sumantra Ghoshal aptly said, leadership is about “making happen what otherwise would not.”⁸

In a corporate setting, information presented should always be intentional—illuminating a specific point of view. Intentions help your audience understand how you want them to feel about the information you’re providing. When setting an intention, use active verbs with strong emotional impact, such as *excite*, *motivate*, *reassure*, *persuade*, and *challenge*—each of which has the power to engage emotions effectively.

Powerful verbs play a vital role in how people process and remember messages. Leaders who aim to inspire or motivate others often tap into feelings that make their message memorable, fostering a sense of shared purpose. As the French writer and aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry beautifully put it, “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up men to gather wood, give orders, and divide the work. Rather, teach them to yearn for the far and endless sea.”⁹ Studies, including Gallup research, show a strong correlation between passionate, engaged leaders and higher team motivation and productivity.¹⁰

People naturally gravitate toward leaders who energize and empower them, seeing them as guides rather than mere informers. Conversely, when leaders choose weak intentions for their message, such as *inform*, *update*, or *review*—or fail to choose an intention at all—they risk reducing their communication to passive awareness. Strong intentions, by contrast, energize your delivery, drive behavior, and enhance congruency between your verbal and nonverbal cues. Actors learn early in their training the importance of intention, knowing that it dictates the power of their performance. As Robin Roberts from *Good Morning America* aptly puts it, “Once you know your intentions, once you know that, the rest will fall into place.”¹¹

The Pinnacle Method

As mentioned previously, the Pinnacle Method is a three-step approach designed to help communicators align their messages in ways that influence emotion and motivate action.

Step 1: Analyze your audience. Effective communication begins with understanding who you are addressing. One common mistake leaders make is thinking about their content before they think about their audience. Entering a presentation or client meeting without a clear understanding of the audience can lead to disconnection or confusion. Just as a tailor wouldn’t make a suit for a customer without first taking measurements, the same concept applies to a leader delivering a speech or presentation. Here, too, tailoring your message to your audience’s specific characteristics becomes essential for a successful outcome. Key factors to consider include demographics (age, education, occupation, and cultural background), psychographics (attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and potential reactions), and situational

elements (setting, audience size, time of day, seating arrangement, and event structure).

Step 2: Identify a desired outcome. Regardless of the nature of your message—whether good, bad, simple, or complex—it's important to define how you want your audience to feel and what action you want them to take. By aligning your objective with an active intention, such as inspiring, challenging, or motivating your audience, you ensure that your message resonates and influences an audience's attitude, knowledge, or behavior.

Step 3: Modify your delivery accordingly. Often overlooked, this step involves adapting your vocal and visual cues to align with your message, remembering that every aspect of your communication, including tone, expression, and gestures, contributes to the impression you create. Synchronizing these elements with your intention ensures clarity and congruency. For example, smiling when delivering good news, accelerating your speaking pace to convey excitement, or maintaining appropriate eye contact while providing feedback can all significantly enhance the impact of your message.

Self-Awareness: The Key to Authenticity and Growth

Self-awareness is the ability to understand one's own thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, along with the impact they have on others. For a professional actor, self-awareness is essential, as it enables performers to be fully present and aware of how their choices—voice, body language, and movement—affect both their scene partners and the audience. By connecting deeply with their characters and understanding their own emotional responses, actors can convey emotions truthfully and realistically, enriching their performances.

In the business world, self-awareness is equally crucial for leaders, enabling them to recognize their strengths and weaknesses, manage stress, and avoid reactive decision-making. While studies show that 95 percent of people think they are self-aware, only 10–15 percent actually are.¹² In his book *Your Brain at Work*, David Rock says, “Without this ability to stand outside your experience, without self-awareness, you would have little ability to moderate and direct your behavior moment to moment.”¹³

Many leaders struggle with self-awareness, often due to the Dunning-Kruger effect—a cognitive bias where individuals with limited skills or knowledge overestimate their competence.¹⁴ In simple terms, those who are mediocre at something often believe they’re better than they actually are. This inflated self-perception, driven by overconfidence, can blind them to areas where they need to grow and improve. After all, confidence without competence is just bluster. As the saying goes, “Confidence is quiet; insecurity is loud.”

Working with someone who lacks self-awareness can be difficult, often leading to resistance to feedback, heightened conflict, and struggles with empathy. These challenges can create frustration and stress for those around them, making collaboration more tense and less productive.

On the flip side, when leaders have strong self-awareness, their teams enjoy a wide range of benefits. Self-aware leaders are more attuned to their strengths, weaknesses, and biases, which enables them to make more informed, balanced decisions. They also have a clearer understanding of their impact on others, which helps them create a more collaborative, supportive team environment. By addressing issues early, offering effective support, and boosting morale, these leaders increase productivity and engagement—ultimately helping to retain top talent and reduce turnover. Moreover, self-aware leaders are open to feedback and committed to ongoing personal and professional growth.

Self-awareness is a key component of emotional intelligence. Self-aware leaders also recognize their personal triggers—what upsets them or gets under their skin—and can manage their emotions and reactions as a result. They understand the impact of their words and actions on their teams, adjusting them as needed to build trust and respect.

A Case Study in Self-Awareness: Ben Francis

Ben Francis, founder of Gymshark, the British fitness apparel brand, embodies self-aware leadership. Starting as a Pizza Hut delivery driver in Birmingham, England, he founded Gymshark at 19 from his parent's garage. Frustrated by the lack of stylish, affordable gym wear, he and his friend Lewis Morgan created their first products by hand. Using social media and influencer partnerships, Francis quickly grew Gymshark, making it the United Kingdom's fastest-growing company by 2016.¹⁵

As the company expanded, Francis recognized gaps in his leadership skills, particularly in the areas of communication and people management. After receiving candid feedback describing him as “erratic” and “hot-headed,” Francis initially dismissed it, but a conversation with his partner Robin helped him see the truth.¹⁶

Realizing Gymshark needed a more experienced leader to meet the needs of the moment, Francis made the “heartbreaking” decision to step down as CEO in 2017, appointing Steve Hewitt to focus on operational growth while he worked on his leadership skills. “I’m proud of my decision,” said Francis, years later, “I would recommend it to anyone else in the position I was in Remove your ego and build the team in a way that’s truly best for your business.”¹⁷ By 2021, Francis resumed the CEO role, and Gymshark is now a billion-dollar brand.

Francis's journey demonstrates how self-awareness drives leadership growth. By embracing feedback and focusing on self-improvement,

he became the CEO Gymshark needed, showing that self-awareness is key to both personal and organizational success.

Read the Room: Mastering Social Awareness

Social awareness is the ability to observe and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. It directly influences one's ability to understand the unique social and ethical norms that guide behavior within a group or organization. When a person is able to develop social awareness, they can accurately interpret and respond to the behaviors of those around them, fostering stronger relationships and deeper understanding.

For professional actors, social awareness is key to creating authentic relationships with their fellow actors in a scene. Being fully present and attuned to the wide range of physical and vocal cues being communicated from the other performers in a scene is essential to being able to respond or react in a genuine, truthful way. By truly observing and understanding people—their motivations, priorities, and nuances—we ultimately foster empathy. And empathy, as we will explore throughout this book, is foundational to building trust and strong connections, whether onstage or in a boardroom.

Social awareness is crucial in business to navigate the complexities of interpersonal and group dynamics. In a rapidly evolving world—shaped by technology, globalization, and the shift to remote work—leaders increasingly need this skill to manage teams dispersed across different time zones and continents.

Additionally, as younger generations enter the workforce, they bring new priorities and expectations that can differ significantly from those of older team members who are approaching retirement. Cultural differences must also be taken into account, too, as team members in India, for example, may have different working styles compared to their colleagues based at a company's headquarters in

Silicon Valley. Social awareness enables leaders to minimize misunderstandings and foster stronger, globally connected relationships. By recognizing how cultural and generational nuances affect collaboration and communication, leaders can better align, motivate, and sustain productivity within diverse teams.

A Case Study in Social Awareness: The Starbucks Incident

A notable example of an organization demonstrating social awareness during a crisis occurred in 2018 when an incident at a Philadelphia Starbucks led to the wrongful arrest of two Black men.¹⁸ The incident highlighted concerns about racial bias and triggered a nationwide debate. It also stood in stark contrast to the chain's brand, as Starbucks has long positioned itself as a "third place"—a welcoming, inclusive environment between home and work, where anyone can feel comfortable. The brand's image was built on a concept of warmth, community, and a commitment to diversity and inclusivity. The incident, however, painted a starkly different picture: two Black men, simply waiting for a friend, were racially profiled and subsequently arrested after a store manager called the police. This directly clashed with Starbucks' values and corporate messaging.

The public outcry suggested that Starbucks had failed to fully train its employees to handle incidents requiring social awareness and bias sensitivity, exposing a gap in execution that seemed contrary to the brand's commitment to inclusivity. In response, Starbucks CEO Kevin Johnson quickly issued an apology, vowing that Starbucks would do "whatever we can to make things right . . . and make any necessary changes [to] prevent such an occurrence from ever happening again."¹⁹ Johnson subsequently met with the two men involved and then took additional action by closing more than 8,000 Starbucks stores so employees could get antibias training. The move showed social awareness by acknowledging an underlying issue and

actively addressing it in a public way. Starbucks has since integrated ongoing training in and dialogue for inclusivity, demonstrating a longer-term commitment to socially aware practices.

Social awareness is essential for today's leaders, as it enhances emotional intelligence and helps them understand and address the diverse emotions, motivations, and needs of their teams. However, building social awareness is a gradual process—one that evolves through continuous personal and professional interactions. As leaders continue to hone these skills, they'll need to navigate new challenges—such as distractions created by technology and the shrinking attention spans of their teams.

In Chapter 2, we'll explore how to effectively manage these distractions and keep their teams focused in an increasingly digital world.

