

Communication Lessons from the Great Commander

Technology can't build trust in teams. It couldn't for Nelson, and it can't for today's leaders either. Famously, Nelson turned a blind eye to what he didn't want to see. When it comes to communications, do you do the same?

Read on....

Admiral Lord Nelson, the brilliant strategist, famously defeated the combined Spanish and French fleet at Trafalgar. On paper, he should have lost, with a fleet of just 33 ships ranged against the enemy's fleet of 50.

When Nelson sent his final signal to the fleet, "*Engage the enemy more closely*", and before the first shot was fired, his work was done. In the days before the battle he had paid close attention to preparation, working closely with the ships' captains to communicate a powerful vision and build an organisation that was efficient, disciplined and innovative.

His commanders had freedom to act on their initiative, unlike the French and Spanish captains who were hampered by the custom of waiting for specific directions from their commander in chief, the hapless French Admiral Villeneuve.

This was the key to operational success - every one of Nelson's top team, his famous "band of brothers", was empowered. They all knew the strategy and had operational freedom to act within it. No-one had to report back to head office to seek permission or to ask what was happening.

Actually, Nelson had no choice but to work in this way. Without text, voice messaging and intranet, his communication was personal. He built deep understanding and trust. He engaged his captains in discussion about strategy, planning and tactics and about their lives, typically aboard **Victory** and characteristically over dinner. He was visible, connecting at every level with seamen and officers throughout the fleet.

Many things have changed since the Nelson story – with prolific communications "noise" in organisations. But many things haven't – such as the need for leaders to communicate well and to be strong team builders. So how do you stack up against Nelson as a communicator?

An extract from Nelson – The Communicator by Steven Burch.
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