

IMAGE THREE  
[ House on Fire ]



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### *House on Fire*

STUDENTS LEARN ON A “NEED TO KNOW” BASIS. DON’T JUST JUMP INTO YOUR TOPIC; TAKE TIME TO EXPLAIN THE RELEVANCE OF IT. WHY SHOULD THEY LISTEN? IF THEIR HOUSE IS ON FIRE—THEY WILL LISTEN. COMMUNICATORS MUST CREATE INCENTIVE FOR PEOPLE TO BELIEVE THEY NEED TO EMBRACE THE TOPIC AT HAND.

My friend Jeff and I enjoy reminiscing about our childhoods. We both had great moms who made growing up very entertaining. There is one phrase he remembers his mom using over and over again. When Jeff claimed he didn’t hear his mom ask him to do something, or when he didn’t obey a request she made of him, his mom would say: “If I told you the house was on fire, you’d listen and obey me!”

We have smiled over that “mom phrase” many times. It’s true, by the way. There are certain bits of information that make it through our filters and cause our ears to tingle and our minds to perk up. Psychologists tell us that humans perceive information to be relevant when it elicits fear, hope or pleasure. When those three items are a part of the message—people tend to tune in. Obviously, we all want to avoid danger or harm, and we all want to receive pleasure or be improved. A message like “Your house is on fire!” naturally qualifies as a topic we need to listen to and heed. In our world today, however, because the average person receives over 250 commercial messages a day, most messages don’t get through.” In addition, we receive information via texts, phone calls, Twitter, email, LinkedIn, Facebook and other social media outlets. Add to this radio, YouTube and other Internet sites, as well as actual face-to-face conversations, and you have over one thousand messages coming at you every day. (It makes me weary just thinking about it.) The fact is, most of us couldn’t possibly process all the messages thrown at us. We’d be overwhelmed and would shut down. So what do we do? We create mental “filters” to screen out any information that seems irrelevant. It’s a coping mechanism nearly all of us have developed like a muscle. That muscle is pretty strong, too.

This reality makes it challenging to “get through” as a communicator. Even good speakers get turned off or tuned out. That’s why great ones take the first few minutes of their speaking time and light a “house on fire.” Not literally, of course, but they take time to cover the “why” before they get to the “what.” Why is this message so important for the audience? Good speakers know they must create incentive for their listeners to stay with them as they talk. They know that people (and especially students) learn on a “need-to-know” basis. When they feel they need to know, they will listen.

I know two math teachers who performed a little experiment that demonstrated the truth of this Habitude. Both instructors taught “Math in Society” to average teens. One of these math teachers taught his high school juniors the subject straight from the textbook. He got right to the “what” and wasted no time explaining the concepts. You can imagine the kind of grades his students made. Only the gifted students did well. The other teacher took a few minutes before every class period and described how important the concept would be to their future; how the students would need it in their everyday lives. Needless to say, this incentive proved valuable. Both student engagement and performance went up, measurably higher than with the first teacher and class. The difference is simple. The first class had no house on fire.

In our world, it isn’t enough to simply suggest your topic is important. It must be urgent as well. When something is important, people prioritize it. When it is urgent, they rush to act. For most people, motivation is not merely an intellectual exercise. It is emotional. During my years working with John Maxwell, he often would say that people don’t change when it is logical. People only change when they:

1. Know enough that they are able to.
2. Care enough that they want to.
3. Hurt enough that they have to.

Sean D’Souza agrees. He says people don’t behave the way you think they will:

- They don’t fall in love at first sight.
- They don’t eat the moment they feel hungry.
- They don’t run to the restroom the moment they feel the need.
- They wait and wait and wait. They don’t act until there is great urgency.<sup>24</sup>

So, communicators must not merely inform people that their house is on fire, they must light a fire under them. Speakers must create the same motivation in people that occurs when...

- They’re starving.
- They’re scared.
- They have to go to the bathroom.
- They’re thirsty.
- They’re exhausted.

These are motivating realities that cause a sense of urgency inside a person. They're illustrations of how communicators must light a fire underneath their listeners. Audiences must feel that it's urgent to listen and act on what the speaker is saying. Otherwise the information will get lost in the filter. This means speakers must warn them of danger if they don't act; cast vision of what could be if they do act; share the benefits of action; and equip them to know how to act.

## CREATING A DILEMMA

Let me put this another way. Effective communicators create a *dilemma* inside their listeners that they will *resolve* within their talk. The dilemma must come first, or audiences have no incentive to listen. Their minds may be in a million other places. But—if the speaker reminds or enlightens them about a problem that **MUST** be solved—suddenly, people are all ears. Putting the fire out is urgent.

The ancient Chinese used a little analogy to describe how to ignite the will of a person to action. They believed our will is like a cart that's pulled by two horses. The names of those two horses are the mind and the emotions. If you get both of these horses moving together—you get the will. The incentive we must create is both logical and emotional; it is directed at the mind and the heart.

The story is told about an Alabama football game, when Coach Bear Bryant was coaching the Crimson Tide. It was late in the game and Alabama was winning. His quarterback was instructed to keep the ball on the ground and run out the clock. Since the defense was expecting this, Bryant's quarterback decided to throw a pass and surprise everyone. When he did, his worst nightmare was realized. He not only threw an interception, he threw it into the hands of the fastest man on the opposing team. Now—it was an impossible chase to run this man down. Or, so it seemed.

Just before he scored, the quarterback actually caught up to him and tackled him. The clock ran out and Alabama went on to win after all. Afterwards, however, Coach Bryant was questioned by the opposing coach: "How could your quarterback catch my defensive back? He's faster than anyone on the field!"

Bryant's answer was classic. He smiled and replied, "It's simple. Your man was running for six points. My man was running for his life."

As communicators, we cannot underestimate the role that motivation plays in the lives of our listeners. When we can communicate incentives and create a sense of urgency, action is sure to follow. It's amazing how fast people will act when a house is on fire.

## TALK IT OVER

1. In our day of unprecedented opportunity, why do you believe so many people need us to light a fire underneath them or “set their house on fire” to get them motivated?
2. Why does feeling overwhelmed paralyze some people from doing anything?
3. Can you name some times in your past that someone provided motivation for you to act by setting your house on fire? What did they say?
4. In what context could you put this Habitude to use right away?

## ASSESS YOURSELF

How well do you provide incentive before you provide information to people? Do you create a sense of urgency? Using the scale from 1–10, with 1 being the lowest score and 10 being the highest, evaluate yourself below:

1. I think about who’s listening and I speak to their perspective  
< 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 >
2. I always provide the “why” before I get to the “what” when I speak  
< 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 >
3. I recognize the best way to motivate people and it usually works  
< 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 >
4. People usually listen to me and do what I request that they do  
< 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 >
5. I help listeners clarify the most important response when I speak  
< 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 >

## TRY IT OUT

Sit down with a team of people and determine the most important message you’d like to communicate to an audience. Together, craft the best approach:

- What are the objections they might have to acting on your message?
- What are the biggest incentives they might have to acting on your message?
- What are the toughest hurdles they must jump to act on your message?
- What are the initial steps you want them to take in response to your message?

Next, lay out the best approach to “lighting the house on fire” and outline the “why” behind your message before you outline the “what.” Practice on your team and discuss your effectiveness.

# HABITUDES

Take the Next Steps to Equipping Your Students for Life

## How Can You Use *Habitudes*?

- Freshmen classes
- High School Advisory Programs
- Residence Life Training
- College First Year Programs
- Student Government Training
- Student Leader Training
- Youth Groups and Small Group
- Mentor Training
- Leadership training for athletic teams
- Corporate professional training
- New team member orientation

## What Can *Habitudes* Do for Your Students or Young Adults?

### *Habitudes* help your students and young adults:

- Break out of the herd mentality to influence others in positive ways.
- Create environments that are conducive to higher grades.
- Raise empathy and minimize bullying.
- Capitalize on personal strengths to be career-ready upon graduation.
- Develop critical thinking skills that produce better life choices, such as choosing healthy friends, improving study habits, and setting meaningful goals.

### *Habitudes* also help athletic teams:

- Transform a group of individual athletes into a unified force.
- Create teams of student-athletes who build trust with each other and their coaches.
- Create language to talk about real life issues in a safe and authentic way.
- Build teams where every athlete thinks and acts like a leader.
- Build athletes who make wise decisions that keep them in competition and out of trouble.

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